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The Problems and Potentials in Haunted Maternal Horror Narrative

by

Sarah L. Novak

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Liberal Arts  
In Humanities  
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies  
College of Arts and Science  
University of South Florida

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## **Dedication**

I would like to thank all of my family members and friends who have supported me throughout this thesis, in more ways than one. But I would especially like to thank:

Priscilla Boatwright, Victoria Wallace, and John Archer – While they went through their college or personal troubles miles away, they still found time to invest in my writing, in my thesis and my personal writing. I would have given up if it wasn't for their constant investment, and I am grateful to have best friends like them.

To my three grandmothers – They have given us so much, always welcoming us into your homes, and giving us great advice and support. I am grateful to be their granddaughter, and I hope to make them proud through this degree.

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To my dad – He has been a great dad, always supporting me in every way, and I will never be able to pay him back, even if I win the lottery and buy him the Boston Red Sox. All I can say is, Dad, you believed that I had important stuff to say, and I finally believe that.

To my mom – My mom has always pushed me to improve and fight for myself. Her advice and love has gotten me through these years, and this project has helped me realize that I am a very lucky daughter. Thank you, Mom, for this thesis.

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## **Abstract**

This thesis will examine the representation of motherhood in horror cinema in order to discuss the problems and potentials of repeated domestic traditions. While maternal horror narratives impose gender roles based on heterosexual hegemonic biases, some of these films also examine the feminine experience and criticize the patriarchal institutional structures that affect domesticity and femininity. If we discuss these promising features, we can build on the implied trajectories, and engender more representation of marginalized experience in order to seek out new methods of cultural stabilization and unity. This proposal relies on Jacques Derrida's theory of hauntology, which addresses past and future specters of anxieties and ideologies, and suggests that in order to confront these anxieties, we must recognize how and why mainstream repeats cultural traditions, and how to engage these specters to project new resolutions. By studying *The Ring* (2001), *Silent Hill* (2006), and *Mama* (2013), I have determined that most maternal horror narratives impose gender roles and standards upon its mother characters, but their conclusions criticize patriarchal rhetoric, and repeat cultural traditions with new, progressive implications that can both challenge and resolve cultural stability. This thesis intends to generate more discussion for domestic representation in mainstream media, negotiate our desire for cultural stability with destabilizing, non-hegemonic resolutions, and call attention to the social pressure enforced on mothers that neglects their experience and position.

## **Introduction**

Motherhood is a common theme in horror cinema, oftentimes representing the dominant hegemonic – middle-class, patriarchal heteronormative, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant – American values whether as a protagonist or an antagonist. However, the mother character and maternal horror narratives harbor great potential for destabilizing the norm and proposing new trajectories of socialization. Few films have realized this potential, and continue to project the problematic, evaluative generalizations of “Good” and “Bad” mothers as well as gender-based roles. Yet if we examine the execution and implications of these films, we could posit more progressive elements or changes that could engender alternatives to repeated traditions.

Horror cinema has a reputation for challenging and dismantling the status quo (Wetmore, 5), including discussions on gender roles and interaction, yet motherhood seems to be the exception to the rule. Whether these films intend to criticize the family structure, or extol the virtues of maternal affection, these messages still repeat the notion that only biologically-born, self-identified women, mothers, and motherhood are crucial to a child’s development based on assumptions of “natural” feminine” nurturing traits. The latter notion is true to an extent, but any parental presence (or lack thereof) and nurturing will affect a child’s development; a child can suffer behavioral or psychological feelings because of absent or abusive fathers, even if they have an attentive, supportive mother. Furthermore, these values detract the mother character’s subjectivity, and encourage spectators to also ignore the maternal experience, which deifies, villainizes, or simply imposes high standards of appropriate parenting on the mother’s shoulders.

This allows strict gender essentialist rhetoric of two genders and two sexes to haunt our society, which maintains constrictive heteronormative ideologies, and patriarchal hegemony. They permeate our contemporary culture, as films like *The Ring* (2001), *Silent Hill* (2006), and *Mama* (2013) demonstrate. These are examples of maternal horror narratives, films that focus on motherhood, and include a mother as a primary character, whether as a protagonist or antagonist, or both. Although each film executes a different goal and intent, most maternal horror narratives associate the mother with the domestic sphere, or home, and reflect society's dependence on the mother-child relationship as a stabilizing force in the context and aftermath of disruptive events.

There are two time periods that produced the most maternal horror narratives: The 1960s to the 1970s, and the 2000s to 2010s. Both periods consist of significant political, economic, social, and cultural upheaval, but each period's mainstream society differ in their response to the upheaval. The 60s-70s faced a significant financial crisis, the Vietnam War controversy and a continuing stalemate in the Cold War, and internal turmoil, which fueled the numerous (radical) social activist groups that criticized the hegemonic traditions. These elements seem to inspire a dominant countercultural atmosphere, which may explain why we see more mother antagonists in these films, meant to criticize the traditional, repressed American values. The 2000s also faced anxieties of destabilization, such as more financial crises, 9/11, and the Iraq War, but this period engenders a return to hegemonic tradition. During this period, mother protagonists populate the maternal horror narrative, in order to stabilize mainstream society by relying on the security of a basic and familiar family relationship, and specified gender roles. Thus, hegemonic society stresses motherhood because of the assumption that the mother-child bond is a natural constant.

This is not to say that motherhood is inherently patriarchal; some feminist rhetorical strategies have used motherhood to push for progressive reforms or critique the institution.



Furthermore, this thesis does not intend to debate the legitimacy of maternal love. However, this thesis will discuss how and why mainstream American society – both hegemonic and counterculture – uses maternal love to stabilize the internal structure. I want to address the repeated gender essentialist traditions, or enforcing gender-specific roles and perpetuating gender-based identity anxieties. I also want to suggest that it is possible to repeat domestic traditions, to repeat the notion of motherhood, but for more progressive purposes, ones that allow for representation of marginalized experiences, including maternal experience. The context and the formulaic elements produced by the 60s and 70s have encouraged more hegemonic traditions, but the potential still exists.

### **The Haunted Horror Genre**

The methodology of repetition derives from Jacques Derrida's (1994) theory of hauntology; I will re-appropriate the technique from political-economic affairs for the use of cinematic studies. This theory is Derrida's response to academics in the 1990s questioning the application of Marxism in the aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse. Derrida did not want to dismiss or ignore the influence of Marxism, stating "it will always be a fault not to read and reread and discuss Marx – which is to say also a few others – and to go beyond scholarly 'reading' or 'discussion'" (Derrida 15). People tend to view the past discourse, or ideological specters – past and future, or repetitions and possibilities – as a threat, even though we actually allow the past to guide our future. His theory of hauntology wants to understand these specters and their impact on our society, and acknowledge the link between the past and future: When we perpetuate traditions without any destabilization, we ignore any alternative, and instead map out a predictable future course. He does not want to replicate old ideologies, but to recognize their influence as a basis for contemporary society, and for future possibilities. (Derrida 10, 19, 48-9)

In this same manner, I intend to discuss the lost potential of certain elements that contribute to my argument, such as Second Wave Feminism and maternal horror narratives. These elements lay the foundation for progress, but also suffer from various problems of essentialism and inclusivity. I intend to explain how and why the certain societal and cultural elements haunt these narratives to produce such problematic aspects—but despite these issues, these films and values can still initiate conversation, and harbor progressive destabilization traits. It's impossible to completely disregard the past, but it's possible to manipulate the rhetoric that has guided us, to produce new rhetoric and values.

Horror is an ideal genre to discuss haunting because its narratives purposefully confront anxieties, whether they are lingering, contemporary, or anticipated. Even if the horror narrative does not consist of supernatural elements, there still exist spectral concerns of the past, present, and future at both personal and institutional levels. In regards to a larger scale, it is possible to engender discussion and solution through such confrontations. As Blake Linnie suggests,

...By focusing on the sites where ideologically dominant models of individual and group identity are sequentially formed, dismantled by trauma and finally re-formed in a post-traumatic context, such narratives can be seen to demand not only a willingness on behalf of audiences to work through the anxiety engendered by trauma, but a willingness also to undertake a fundamental questioning of those ideological dominant models of individual, collective, and national identity that can be seen to be deployed across post-traumatic cultures, as a means of binding (hence isolating and concealing) the wounds of the past in a manner directly antithetical to their healing. (Blake, 2-3)

Rather than repeating the same anxieties or allowing specific events to inspire cultural malaise, we can challenge the dominant thought and past ideology, and pursue a new type of future. Specters, whether as ideologies or historical events, will always exist and haunt us, but we can determine the trajectory, or take new, active approaches to addressing these specters, destabilize the secured ideal, and find alternative routes. The horror genre actively engages the cultural anxiety, to manifest fears or negative experiences into physical – or at least less abstract – and recognizable figures, and ask how to survive or adapt, or if there is a hope to begin. It provides an outlet to unleash our turmoil and emotions, but it also provides the opportunity to ask if these antagonistic forces need to transform. As Paul Wells's (2000) claims,

...The contemporary horror film has defined and illustrated the phobias of a 'new' world characterized by a rationale of industrial, technological and economic determinism. Arguably, more than any other genre, it has interrogated the deep-seated effects of change and responded to the newly-determined grand narratives of social, scientific, and philosophical thought. ...This effectively re-configured the notion of evil in the horror text...in a way that moved beyond issues of fantasy and ideology and into the realms of material existence and an overt challenge to established cultural value systems. (Wells 3)

Wells engages with horror in an ambivalent manner, where in addressing relationships to the hegemony he uses the words "challenge" and "threat," each word having different meanings. Challenge means conflict, but there is positive implication, where challenge allows for change and progress. Threat, on the other hand, is fairly negative, suggesting aggression and destruction. I cannot say whether Wells intended for this tension, but I believe that evokes horror's potential.

These films appear threatening and destructive by portraying legitimate anxieties and fears, yet they can posit or inspire change to these systems as critique.

Wells also claims that antagonistic forces in the horror films are “embodying states of ‘otherness’ which ... are ultimately a parallel and threatening expression of it;” it meaning the hegemonic social body. The states of otherness, those that do not conform to the hegemonic experience, or the Other, “threaten the maintenance of life and its defining practices” (Wells 10). In general, this is true: It is typical that the antagonistic forces are physical embodiments of death and the unknown, or the Other. However, this neglects narratives that intentionally address other abstract bodies such as political or parental authority, or impeding cultural standards. We question who the true villain and hero of the story are, because horror blurs the lines of experience and position. Furthermore, “threat” may not be entirely negative, because it inspires destabilization and change. Conventional Other threats can even project marginalized experiences, and even if the non-hegemonic perspective is coded antagonistic, the audience can recognize and sympathize with the monster’s subjectivity.

Wells provides a useful base understanding for the purposes of the horror genre, yet he defines it in a very broad sense, which does not distinguish horror genres like the creature feature films of the 1950s from the 1980s slasher films, although they project different goals and motivations. However, Isabel Christina Pinedo’s text, *Recreational Terror* (1997), differentiates postmodern horror from classical through five traits. I want to focus on one trait: “Postmodern horror repudiates narrative closure,” contrasting the classical horror film “in which (hu)man agency (human agency understood as male agency) prevails and the normative order is restored by the film’s end.” Postmodern films starting in the 1960s refute narrative closure by providing ambivalent, open endings where “either the monster triumphs or the outcome is uncertain”

(Pinedo, 29-32). By this she means that the monster or antagonist of the film is more ambiguous on a moral spectrum, and contributes to the rejection of repressed values—and if the antagonistic force is defeated at the end, the film hints at their return, or the surviving protagonists must suffer the consequences of the traumatic experiences.

These are generalized classifications, as there are exceptions to the rules for both classical and postmodern, so we'll expand upon her meaning of the word "closure." Narrative closure often includes the defeat of the antagonist, and implies the return to an initial state, or a (typically optimistic) progression of events. Classical narratives typically have external conflict, so if the external conflict is resolved, then the plot concludes. There is little discussion for the future—how the narrative's events affected the protagonist, what consequences the final actions generated, and if future conflict may occur. The narrative reproduces restrictive hegemonic values, and so determines a secure, predictable future. Perhaps audiences of classical horror may have questioned, but few classical horror films encouraged this contemplation; the films often conclude the film on the demise of the antagonist(/protagonist) and resolve that people should not meddle in affairs beyond human control.

Postmodern horror marks the relocation of horror, from external to internal, and so there are little to no (positive) narrative closures: The antagonist either triumphs, or terror continues to plague the survivors. If the antagonist is even defeated, there still exist the consequences and aftereffects of the events. One of the films that we will close read, *Psycho* (1960) concludes with the capture, not the demise, of Norman Bates because the movie bases its anxiety on whether he (and by extension society or individuals) can separate and develop a new identity, or remain chained to our parents or the past. Another film significant to this chapter, *Carrie* (1968), kills the titular character, yet the last scene shows her memory tormenting a side character's dreams.

Postmodern films want the audience to ask, “What will happen next?” after the credits; the story doesn’t end, and it most certainly does not (want to) regress to an initial stabilized state. When we lose our trust in past traditions, then we face a capricious future, which evokes more anxieties and trepidation. Well-known postmodern franchises, such as Wes Craven’s *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984-1994), address these concerns, showing the protagonist undergoing therapy, or the antagonist attempting to rehabilitate, but failing because the horror was so prevalent and traumatic—just as war cannot leave retired soldiers’ memories, or the Civil Rights and Second Wave Feminism cannot completely solve the social issues of gender, race, sexuality, identity, and community. Postmodern terror and anxiety mirror mainstream America’s internal turmoil, and because these fears are now internal and personal, then there is no narrative closure.

At first, one believes that this lack of narrative closure is best embodied by the idea of horror film franchises, and their immortal antagonists, such as the cases of *Halloween* (1978) and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Classical horror monsters like Dracula and Frankenstein’s Monster also enjoyed an immortal status and long-running franchises beyond initial production, but the difference is that postmodern antagonists developed from postmodern sensibilities influenced by the 1960s and 1970s Vietnam War, and various protest movements, which inspired counterculture rhetoric and sensibilities that want to destabilize the hegemony. Dracula and Frankenstein’s Monster behave as the external Other that the dominant hegemony represses; Michael Meyers and Freddy Krueger represent fears about America, and potential internal malevolence lurking in the suburbs. Postmodern films allow us to question who the protagonist and the antagonist really are, whether the Other is an external threat, or if we are our own Other, which then becomes an internal threat. Postmodern horror classifies internal stabilization as a threat because it is stagnant; the status quo or comfort zone needs disruption in order to change.

Some academics interpret a lack of narrative closure with negative connotations, like an inherent desire to destroy the society (Wetmore 5, 203). I think postmodern films have more positive implications. These films can redeem the Other, and reclassify the antagonist, which can broaden representation of marginalized voices, because they relocate threat from external to internal. Postmodern films often indulge in objectification and sexual violence against women, but they also can engage with feminine experience and complicate gender essentialism through their female protagonists, thus proliferating feminism into mainstream conscious. They point out that problems exist within the dominant, repressive hegemonic structure, and even posit solutions. *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) ends on a negative note, wherein Rosemary births the demonic child and finds her personal agency stripped, but it helps the spectators recognize that patriarchal institutions, such as medicine or husbands, impede women's self-authority. This engenders more support for feminism by bringing attention to the feminist experience.

Part of this feminine experience includes domesticity, motherhood, and the American Family, which represents the internal or the hegemony as the basic social unit that perpetuates cultural values and behavior. Academics like Robin Wood (1986) and Tony Williams (1997) recognize the significance of the home and family to postmodern horror film, and they note postmodern horror's conflicting perception of the family as both innocent and corrupted. Wood in particular provides an insightful analysis between *The Omen* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, each film painting a very distinct, different portrait of the family structure. The portrayals respectively either reaffirm or repudiate hegemonic ideals, and thus classify the family as "good" or "bad". He gives insight about each film's critical reception and atmosphere: *The Omen* – which embodies the "good family" facing an external Other threat that infiltrates and destroys – tailors itself to a bourgeois demographic that typically upholds the hegemonic values.

In contrast *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* appeals to a non-bourgeois audience with its low budget, unabashed violent and sexual content, and portrayal of the “bad” family as both the Other, and as a twisted reflection of the traditional hegemonic family (Wood 79-87). These examples show not only two different types of families, but also two different perceptions of the American family. Bourgeois, hegemonic sensibilities frame the ideal American family as desirable because the traditional family upholds and perpetuates hegemonic traditions. Those that do not apply to or reject the hegemony view the family as a threat because of this very reason.

It should be noted that “good” and “bad” families can refer to different ideals, depending on the context. The base evaluation typically classifies a family that attends to the offspring’s various needs as Good. This contrasts a family that neglects the offspring to a detrimental effect, which is Bad. However, Good can also mean a family that complies with and reproduces hegemonic values into the child, versus a Bad family that resists and disregards this behavior, and may not take into consideration the child’s wellbeing. A family that resists the hegemonic standards can raise a well-developed individual, and vice versa. For this thesis, unless specifically stated otherwise, Good and Bad will refer to parents/families that respectively satisfy or reject hegemonic standards, and so influence their offspring on these principles.

This definition applies to the differences between *The Omen* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*; *The Omen* contains a Good family that attempts to raise the offspring in accordance to hegemonic standards, whereas *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* depicts a family that repudiates hegemonic behavior, and influences its offspring to become killers. Both films correlate the family to the hegemony because of the prevailing image of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, middle-class, patriarchal, heterosexual two-parent household. But each film portrays the family structure as Good or Bad, which inspires two different interpretations of the hegemonic tradition.



It depends on the film and their targeted demographic to argue whether this tradition is under or *is* the threat. In the case of maternal horror narrative, it is oftentimes both: The family is under threat from maternal influence. However, it is possible to redirect these repetitions for different, more progressive purposes by changing the family. This is a solution I intend to address during my close-readings, especially when discussing the problems and potentials of the films that this thesis examines. We can replace the idealized, heterosexual two-parent household with new types of families, those often underrepresented and dismissed in mainstream media, which then removes the reductive questions of family as threatened or the threat, and reconsider the anxieties in a new light for different solutions.

I stress this point because the media's reductive evaluations of American families contribute to the reductive evaluations of mothers, which then influences mainstream American culture. The Good and Bad evaluations apply to motherhood, in both media and film. The mother is a complicated figure in American culture because of her correlation to the domestic sphere and child-raising, and yet in general narratives will portray her in three extremes: Absent, benevolent, and malevolent. This thesis concerns "present" mothers, those that are protagonists or antagonists; we will examine two extreme generalized depictions, Good and Bad mothers, in order to understand how society engages in perceiving and portraying motherhood.

### **Good and Bad Motherhood**

We as individuals and society have a complicated relationship with motherhood, perceiving them in extremes such as devoted nurturers or neglectful abusers. These portrayals rarely consider the individual maternal experience, and impose impossible evaluative standards. Even films with mother protagonists only superficially engage in the character's subjectivity; instead they use the mother protagonist to project an example of Good maternal behavior.

It may seem obvious to state that the mother is significant to the domestic sphere, but it's important to consider the historical justification. Heteronormative traditions of male versus female specific roles have existed in multiple cultures throughout the centuries, but this became more strictly defined in Western civilization through Victorian culture – specifically targeted for middle- and upper-class members of society that could live on one individual's salary – that introduced the separation of spheres. These spheres referred to the private and public, or domestic and civic, aspects of life, and separated women and men into these respective slots. Men were expected to engage in the world, and women were confined to the home in order to provide a perfect, loving domicile for their husband and children as a retreat from the corrupted public sphere. Therefore, mothers had to be pure, moral guardians, far more than their husbands needed to be. While it was preferable for a man to behave in a Christian manner, it was understandable if he indulged himself. Mothers (and by extension women), on the other hand, needed to be pure and morally correct according to hegemonic standards, in order to preserve dominant hegemonic values. Society expected women to be “angels of the hearth” that maintained the family faith, and raised their children in the acceptable cultural manner, which is why appropriate maternal behavior was often held to such strong standards. This also applied to single or young women, thus equating femininity with motherhood and passive, moral conduct.

What constitutes as maternal behavior, or the classic phrase, “maternal instinct,” and what do we mean by “appropriate” and “acceptable?” For the purposes of this thesis (and thus will extend in usage to other chapters), I will use Jane Swigart's terms of “maternal love” and “maternal impotence” and definitions of the “good” and “bad” mothers, as taken from her text *The Myth of the Bad Mother: The Emotional Realities of Mothering* (1991). “Maternal love”, as she defines it,

...suggests an ability to intuit an individual child's needs and unique course of development, a capacity for genuine concern and actual physical care, and a willingness to use subjective experience, empathetic identification, even symbiotic fusion to understand and care for the young. Maternal love requires many different skills and behaviors. In addition to physical care...all children need certainty that the care-giver will not abandon them as they begin to enjoy more autonomy ...I use the term *maternal* love because it more readily suggests the constant giving of care and protection...without asking anything in return. (Swigart 24-5)

Maternal love is not about the mother herself, but what she offers to the child. The concept and the child – and by extension society, because all members of society are offspring – are the subjects of maternal love, whereas the mother is the object and has no true agency in the relationship (Swigart, 10). “They,” the children, are the focus; we care about what “they” receive from the mother's nurture.

In contrast, she classifies “maternal impotence” as “feelings...[that] arise when we do not have the patience, desire, ego strength, time, money, or energy to fulfill these needs,” which she relates to sexual impotence that cis-gender men experience. She raises the point, “claims of potency stem from the fear of being a loser in the competitions fostered by our culture's sexual stereotypes, from feelings of inadequacy, shame, or powerlessness” (Swigart 24-5). A mother only becomes a subject in the definition of maternal impotence. It's interesting that Sigwart raises the point that impotency often correlates to powerlessness, because a mother is both powerful and powerless in the relationship with a child. A mother has the power to dictate how she will nurture and discipline the child, and how she will guide their actions and behaviors.

However, this responsibility also infringes on her agency and power: Because it is supposedly “easy” to raise a child, and hold authority over them, mainstream society then enforces strict standards upon the mother, and blames her for any negative action she takes against her child, or any negative trait that the child develops.

These expectations lead into the myths, as Sigwart calls them, of the Good and Bad mothers. Admittedly these are broad terms, but I agree with Sigwart in using these words and their implications of evaluative morality as it exposes society’s assessment of motherhood. In order to discuss and destabilize these notions, we must acknowledge their troubling existence and influence in society that maintains extremes. Fiction, especially horror, relies and perpetuates these terms through extreme tropes: The Good Mother “adores her offspring...she is exquisitely attuned to her children and is so resourceful that she is immune to boredom. Nurturing comes as naturally as breathing, and child rearing is a source of pleasure that does not require discipline or self-sacrifice” which contrasts the bad mother who is “easily bored by her children, indifferent to their well-being; a mother who is so narcissistic and self-absorbed, she cannot discern what is in the best interests of her children. Insensitive to their needs, she is unable to empathize with them and often uses them for her own gratification. This woman damages her children without knowing it. Unable to learn from the suffering she causes, she is incapable of change” (Sigwart 6-7).

I want to discuss three points about these descriptions. First, both terms imply stagnation, which removes the necessity for development, and thus subjectivity. We must acknowledge the pretense that society does not expect change from a mother, whether she is Good or Bad. If she is Good, she does not need to change. A Good Mother is perfect to begin with, a natural caretaker, so she has no reason or purpose to change, which removes the mother’s individual identity.

Humans develop over periods of time because of life experiences, but the Good Mother does not need any life experience other than taking care of her children. The Bad Mother needs to change, but she does not, because she is selfish and childish, considering her own needs first before her children's. We don't expect it, and so we dismiss any possible redemption. There is no middle ground in society's understanding of motherhood, even though that is the common reality, because "the emotional realities of child rearing expose us to our most destructive urges as well as our deepest hopes, longings, and capacities for love. With our offspring, we so want to be our best selves...yet the absolute dependency and helplessness of young children require every caregiver to give, at times, without anything immediate or tangible to sustain" (Swigart 7), which can inspire conflicting feelings of frustration and want. Maternal impotence is not Bad; it's natural.

There also exists the hypocritical requirement of discipline, how parents must teach their children culturally-acceptable behaviors and social skills through a balance of rewards and punishment. If we consider the extremist rhetoric and expectations that maternal love instills, it's especially difficult for mothers to address discipline. A father can provide discipline, because he is the absolute, masculine authority figure, who should have enough emotional distance to his child to enact the final word. A mother, a feminine figure, is supposed to be soft and gentle, who should nurture her children, who should not confront, but be passive and talk through issues. Yet we blame the mother for rowdy, inappropriately-behaving children, which then raises the hypocrisy of cultural standards placed upon mothers. We blame the mother, not the father, even though typical traditions puts the father in charge of incentivizing the child (whether through positive or negative efforts) for his or her conduct, and therefore is responsible for the child's unruly behavior. We blame the mother, because she is the parent accompanying the child in public, so she should both discipline and not discipline her child.

My second point of criticism concerns self-sacrifice. Sigwart states that good mothers do not need to self-sacrifice, which implies an obligatory, involuntary choice of giving up personal dreams and desires. However, her point neglects literal self-sacrifice that exists in many narratives – such as the children’s book series *Harry Potter* (1997-2007) – where the mother gives up her life to protect her children (including complications in childbirth), and often explains the mother’s absence. A mother’s absence makes her the ideal parent, because her perfect maternal love is not “tainted” by the realities of maternal impotence.

Not only that, in films that I will close-read, there is a definitive implication of sacrifice on the mother’s behalf. Films *The Ring* (2001) and *Mama* (2012) portray bad mothers, or characters that suffer from maternal impotence, who put their career or self-interests before their children. While they are not punished or made antagonistic, the narrative chronicles their development into good mothers, where they must sacrifice their self-interests for their child’s. Even in films like *Silent Hill* (2006) that portray an initial good mother, there is a sense of “sacrifice,” of undergoing traumatic experiences and sacrificing agency and freewill to protect the child. It’s not to say these messages are completely detrimental, but we cannot ignore the emphasis of maternal sacrifice that narratives perpetuate, which detracts our understanding with the mother’s perspective. We expect mothers to sacrifice because that is their “duty.” Their position and experience does not matter, we do not care how much they need to sacrifice, they just need to in order to nurture.

The third point addresses the disconnect between maternal impotence and the Bad Mother. Maternal impotence is an actual phenomenon where mothers feel as though they cannot express maternal love through various reasons. They are not seeking self-gratification through the relationship; they are just incapable of providing their offspring “perfect” maternal love.

There are abusive, neglectful mothers who place their concerns over their children, but there are also mothers who cannot intuit and satisfy all of their children's needs, for one reason or another. The problem is that cinema, especially maternal horror cinema, neglects this detail, which neglects the individual maternal experience. Thus the mother is Bad—and not for suffering from maternal impotence, because the mainstream conscious does not recognize this concept.

We can now discuss the history of the maternalism and antimaternalism cycle that has affected American culture, how society has both influenced and been influenced by cultural attitudes regarding motherhood, and how different arguments for and against maternal love contributed to fictional portrayals. It is important to stress that it will not be a criticism against either value or lens applied to it; both sides offer material applicable to my thesis's concluding arguments. This will, first, contextualize the attitudes that influence (and are influenced by) cultural texts. Second, this information will help me criticize extremist proponents of each viewpoint that contribute to the problems concerning motherhood.

Maternalism is both a simple and complicated cultural attitude: Simple because it involves one value, maternal love, and complicated because it is entrenched in historical and political movements. Rebecca Jo Plant in her text *Mom: The Transformation of Motherhood in Modern America* (2010), employs the term as “an outlook that defined motherhood as both a familial and civic act; enabled white, middle-class women to exert a morally charged influence within the public and private realms; and allowed mothers to claim the largest share of their children's gratitude and affection” (Plant 7). In a reductive sense, maternalism is the perpetuation and application of maternal love in society. As the last part implies, it contributes to feminist thought and activism, but it also contributes to patriarchal hegemony. Plant points out that her definition is limited because it lumps together individuals or political opponents into one attitude.

I agree, which is why I will now extract and distinguish two rhetorical strategies: Patriarchal and feminist maternalism. Plant does not use these terms in her text because she examines American history from WWI – briefly mentioning the nineteenth century, and how Victorian values helped to establish maternalism – to the 1960s, concluding with her criticism of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).

Maternalism instigates maternal civic action; feminist maternalism broadens and expands this communal duty. First-Wave Feminists used this rhetoric to justify their participation in social work, since they worked within the confining boundaries of the separation of sexes without total radical change. Social work at the turn of the century became a concern of the private sphere, as it involved matters of morals and domestic welfare in regards of the lower-class, specifically for the lower-class children who could not afford to attend school. Through helping the children, female social workers could then reach out to mothers who had to work, could not afford to adhere to Victorian values, and suffered abused at the hands of their husbands. A notable act they undertook was the Prohibition Act, and no matter the opinions on this controversy, it is possible to view this action as a feminist maternalist movement, inspiring well-intentioned mothers to help other families, and therefore engender female participation in the public sphere.

Feminist maternalism continues into the 1960s and Second Wave Feminism, but instead of coinciding within the boundaries of the separation of spheres, advocates used motherhood to criticize the problematic patriarchal structure. As Lauri Umansky points out in *Motherhood Reconceived* (1996), countercultural protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s suffered from patriarchal traditions themselves, and in general male countercultural leaders did not consider the female experience or perspective or the institutional influence affecting women's self-authority.



They would blame the family and mother for comply with the repression of sexuality, which counterculturalists saw as imperative to discussion of authenticity and breaking from the Cold War values. “But as feminists would soon point out, counterculturalists could attempt to unite sex, community, and motherhood without fearing the encroachment of a familiar domesticity only because they ignored the specific, material realities of motherhood for women, and because they attempted to incorporate mothering into the holistic, eroticized rubric of ‘authentic’ experience.” Feminists would argue that society conscribes meaning to body and sexuality – which initiated the separation of gender, sexuality, and biological sex – and that “the division of culture and nature results in the domination of nature by culture. Women, with their childbearing functions, are perceived as more connected to nature,” which is why culture places women in submissive roles. (Umansky 23-8) This is an example of how Second Wave Feminists were able to argue not only against a patriarchal hegemony, but a patriarchal counterculture as well, and shift the blame away from mother or women.

This is not to say that feminist maternalists completely disregarded the essentialist rhetoric of women and nature; some would re-appropriate the image of the “earth mother” as a preferable contrast to the sterile, technological patriarchal Christian hegemony, and would argue that emphasizing natural maternal love would affect change in society. Others would simply speak out against technological hegemonic practices that removed female agency, such as childbirth and the dominance of male obstetricians, which we will address in *Rosemary’s Baby* (Umansky 64-5). Feminist maternalism isn’t a perfect solution, but we see the potential in this discourse, of actually achieving change not just for the sake of children and the nation, but for individual women. We see the re-direction of intention and importance onto the mother herself, where her subjectivity becomes the primary concern.

Of course, this rhetoric faces an opposing discourse, patriarchal maternalism, which justifies the confining gender roles placed upon women, arguing that maternal love requires all of a woman's attention and devotion. While it may allow mothers to participate in civic activity, it emphasizes the traditional feminine qualities, passive and emotional behavior, to explain why mothers (and women) should remain the private spheres. This is arguably a more prevailing social thought—the rationale that maternal love is about the child, and requires all of a mother's efforts and resources to ensure appropriate nurturing, which then enforces strict standards upon mothers. In contrast to feminist maternalist advocates, patriarchal maternalists enforce traditional boundaries, maintaining the value that mothers and women should maintain a passive nurturing role submissive to active masculinity.

However, some individuals take issue with the “feminization of American culture,” arguing that overbearing maternal influence hindered masculine development. This influences the counter-attitude of antimaternalism that defines motherhood as nothing more than a biological role, and decries the deification, or even the existence, of maternal love. While antimaternalism also has two rhetorical tangents, also patriarchal and feminist, antimaternalism seems to have developed more as a patriarchal response that concerned itself with the psychological affect on soldiers. This is the crux of patriarchal antimaternalist rhetoric, which not only debases the notion of maternal love, but criticizes mothers for negatively affecting psychological development, specifically in boys, with the fear of “feminizing” them. Academics like Plant will point to Philip Wylie as the first public critic against maternalism, or what he called “momism,” in his text *A Generation of Vipers* (1942), specifically attacking the affectionate elderly mother that he interpreted as domineering and suffocating, hindering “healthy” or hegemonic masculine development, and being a parasite on American culture.

Wylie's text generated a new popular attitude in culture, and while Plant notes that some films tried to maintain the mother-son relationship as endearing and everlasting, others also criticized this as troubling and negative. For instance, the image of the loving mother and her filial soldier son no longer seemed healthy to psychological experts—these experts blamed this relationship for recovering veterans' behavioral disorders, which they included homosexuality, and how soldiers seemed entirely too dependent on their mothers. These experts blamed the mothers, failing to recognize that society enforced this relationship (Plant).

Wylie is classified as the first critic, but early, undefined antimaternalism existed prior to his text, most memorably in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis of the castrating mother. This contributed to patriarchal antimaternalist rhetoric, as behavioral and psychological experts implemented Freud's analysis and theories to instruct mothers on how to behave appropriate and nurture the perfect family. This contributed to the impossible standards placed upon mothers, judging them for being too domineering and stringent, or too inattentive and neglectful. Sons were the main priority, as these experts wanted to raise an appropriate masculine generation of leaders and soldiers – or at least active, independent businessmen – but daughters could also be negatively affected by maternal affection, and thus develop into overbearing mothers themselves, instead of as devoted wives (Ogden 174-87). If we consider the fact that this attitude was so prominent in the 1940s and 1950s, it's not so difficult to understand why counterculturalists may not have considered female agency and independence.

Not all feminists advocated for mothers' rights. Feminist antimaternalism is often associated with radical Second Wave Feminist rhetoric; the advocates decry the institution of family, marriage, and children, arguing that the role of mother and wife oppresses women. Umansky generalizes these advocates as oftentimes young and childless, who would not

empathize with the needs of the mother. Like male counterculturalists, these feminists would view mothers as contributing to the patriarchal hegemony by reproducing children, thus tying their identity and responsibility to the family. Umansky argues, “The early women’s movement, like the New Left and the counterculture, was a generational protest movement. When feminists pilloried the traditional housewife, they were referring only too clearly to their own mothers.” But they also had criticisms against their peers who did choose to have a family: “Some early radical feminist activists tended to reject mothers as women suffering from false consciousness, at best, and not women with whom to get entangled. ...The enemy, in other words, could easily include the kind of woman who made men, and not other women, her priority” (Umansky 35-36). It is natural to see this resentment against mothers, especially on a generational level, if we consider how society influenced children to blame the mother. As daughters, they might have resented their mothers who raised them to be “proper women” so that they would fit into American society, not realizing that their mothers had no choice but to teach them as such; or they might have resented the attention their mothers lavished on sons, not recognizing that it was society, not necessarily intentional individual decision, that directed women’s attention to men.

I do not mean to critique feminist antimaternalism, but merely to discuss how Second Wave feminism did not unify on the question of motherhood. In this sense, their criticisms against motherhood also contributed to the social rhetoric that blamed mothers, rather than questioning the cultural values that might have produced these extreme portrayals of mothers. I also do not mean to dismiss Second Wave Feminism, but it is important to recognize its limitations and flaws. It is an ideological specter; we should recognize and engage it, but we do not need to repeat its theories in a stagnant manner; just as First Wave Feminism evolved into Second Wave to suit its context, so did Third Wave Feminism evolve for the contemporary time.

Now, it is important to acknowledge that Third Wave feminism tends to inaccurately generalize its predecessors, feeding into sexist notions that Second Wave feminists are victimizers who decry sex and fun. However, we cannot ignore the fallacies of Second Wave feminism, which projects the notion of shared experience between women; women meaning individuals born with XX chromosomes. This neglects individuals that may identify as women or feminine qualities in spite of their biologies and thus it perpetuates gender essentialist rhetoric (Snyder 179, 183-93).

This especially influences values and expectations of motherhood, as motherhood was a divisive subject among Second Wave feminists, who questioned whether mothers contributed to patriarchal oppression or empowered themselves—and which tended to ignore individual mothers' opinions and positions, talking at mothers rather than to them. Third Wave feminism – which I classify as broadening and redefining gender, sexuality, and empowerment through diverse experiences – is obviously not perfect, but it allows us to question gender identity and politics further (Snyder, 183-92). Third-Wave Feminism, more so than Second Wave, allows us to determine whether the films that we will examine challenge or enforce the heteronormative standard, and if the latter, how we can incorporate and compromise old and new elements or experiences to address the problems, and how to broaden the singular experience to include others that do not conform to the standard.

We will also apply abjection as a methodology, although we will reserve the major discussion for the final chapter. This contributes to the cultural narrative of abjection, a psychoanalytical theory founded by Julia Kristeva. Abjection concerns the expulsion and rejection of “filthy” elements – the abject – that infringe upon an individual's selfhood – defined by hegemonic standards of self – which establishes the familiar boundaries of self versus the Other, or non-hegemonic elements that disrupt the hegemonic definition of the “natural order.”

The filth commonly refers to the base physical excretions, such as urine, pus, mucus, and excrement, but it can also refer to behavioral, psychological, or developmental “filth,” those that impede an individual’s compliance to appropriate selfhood.

This filth can also refer to motherhood, as female sexuality carries connotations of undesirable “filth” that needs expulsion; one abject example is menstrual blood. Another example is pregnancy and childbirth, which “links [the mother] directly to the animal world and to the great cycle of birth, decay, and death.” The problem with these links is that “[a]wareness of his links to nature reminds man of his mortality and of the fragility of the symbolic order,” something that opposes the Judeo-Christian and Social Darwinist tenants that strongly influence American culture. Being human or civilized implies control over nature and selfhood, whether this authority is instilled by God or by natural scientific order. However, “woman’s reproductive functions place her on the side of nature rather than the symbolic order” because pregnancy evokes this cycle of life and death, and mortality. This is a common tradition for many cultures, but in American culture, this difference subverts female agency, placing women in a submission, inferior position under men, which causes women to be identified first by their body compared to other traits (Creed 47-8). This means expelling maternal influence, in order to allow paternal-based civilized law to guide the individual.

It’s important to clarify that Julia Kristeva, the methodology’s founder, does not propose abjecting maternal influence for paternal, but recognize a cultural phenomenon. However, there is also potential in abjection, in that abjection allows us to confront the “undesired filth,” and instead of getting rid of it as traditional narratives suggest, we can instead transfigure and re-appropriate the filth – which can include the Other and non-hegemonic elements – and reconsider a selfhood that rejects the hegemonic standard.

## Chapter Organization

Before we can abject these traditions, however, we must understand historical values concerning motherhood, and so, Chapter One will examine the application of the historical notions and terms discussed in this introduction through well-known maternal horror movies from 1960 to 2001 that have helped develop the maternal horror narrative formula. Chapter Two will demonstrate through the close reading of *Silent Hill* (2006) that mainstream culture still relies on gender essentialist rhetoric for cultural stability, even though they project feminist discourse. Chapter Three will expand on maternal horror narrative's potential that can repeat hegemonic traditions through alternative methods in order to produce different, more progressive conclusions, as seen in the film *Mama* (2013). All three chapters will consider the problems and promising potentials of these films, discussing what elements to reject – and explaining why they may exist – and what aspects to develop. The conclusion then will posit possible solutions that destabilize gender essentialist rhetoric that still haunt the future of maternal horror narratives.

## **Chapter One: History of Horror-able Mothers**

This chapter will examine the significance of horror films as both reflecting and influencing American culture, specifically as it pertains to motherhood. I will analyze five horror films with significant mother characters, produced between the 1960s and 2000. I will compare four of the horror films in pairs, based on timeframe (by decades) and theme or implication, and finish off with discussing *The Ring* (2001) as an introduction to contemporary horror films about motherhood. This will rely on material discussed in the introduction, using terms of maternalism and antimaternalism, keeping in mind the context of American culture at each film's release date. This chapter will argue that cultural values and anxieties concerning motherhood, domesticity, and stability are trapped in a cycle of response to the previous generation, which then perpetuates hegemonic behavior. Even if a film intends to challenge the dominant hegemonic traditions, whether by decrying or uplifting maternal affection as an opposing argument, it still holds the individual mother to unobtainable societal standards.

Childhood development is a common cultural anxiety that resonates throughout history, and we find these fears replicated in horror films, often symbolized through antagonistic mothers. Mother protagonists populate contemporary horror films, but the same fears and standards for mothers exist. In order to understand these values, we must examine the influence of previous texts, and the cultural context that films like *Psycho* (1960) and *Carrie* (1976) responded to or reflected. If we discover the details of the cycle, and the justification for it, we can then discuss why and how we may disrupt this cycle for the sake of future spectral anxieties.



These films offer problematic material, but it is possible to discover their promising potential for challenging the heteronormative values, and breaking the cycle. I do not want to only criticize these films or dismiss them as outdated. Instead, the close-readings will help us understand their cultural context that influenced the messages and narrative elements, and address the positive aspects that contribute to a possible, destabilizing solution. There are reasons these films remain relevant to the contemporary cultural conscious, more so than rival maternal horror narratives released at the same time. The five films that I will discuss not only have influenced future maternal horror narratives and helped develop the formula and tropes, but they also contain more promise of redemption and re-appropriation for maternal or feminine experience.

### **1960s – *Psycho* vs. *Rosemary's Baby***

The differences between Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) and Roman Polanski's *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) reveal a shift in American values, or at least in Hollywood's intentions to reflect the dominant cultural mindset. Patriarchal antimaternalist concerns that coincide the trajectory of the conservative hegemony shifts to feminist maternalist discourse that Second Wave feminists lobbied against both the hegemony and the counterculture. The key component in this comparison is perspective: How and why these narratives select a specific character's point of view to connect to the audience, to affect different opinions concerning mothers. We will see the difference of the mother character as antagonist and protagonist, what rhetoric motivates these portrayals, what the narrative implies about mothers and the state of the family, and how these films contribute to the maternal horror narrative formula. While both films consist of generalizations based on gender, they also show signs of destabilizing the norm and challenging the patriarchal hegemonic sensibilities. Although *Psycho* repeats patriarchal antimaternalist rhetoric and tradition, it stands out for as one of the first postmodern horror films.

It consists of a competent and authoritative female antagonist, and allows its audience to sympathize with the queer antagonist, Norman Bates, which hints at the promise of challenging gender essentialism. *Rosemary's Baby*, in contrast, projects feminist maternalist rhetoric, and criticizes masculine authority and institutions. Even though the protagonist is passive, it revolves around her experience, and thus calls attention to women's experience.

On the surface level, *Psycho* is a simple story to follow: A young woman who steals her boss's money stops at a motel run by Norman Bates, who lives with his oppressive mother. The mother seems to kill her—until the end reveals Norman dressed as his mother, having taken on a split personality based on her when he killed her years ago. What makes this story complex is the question of who the protagonist and antagonist are. The young woman, Marion, acts as the heroine of the story until her death, the same point that Norman appears, effectively passing the title of protagonist on to him. The second half of the film follows Lila and Sam, Marion's sister and lover respectively, as they search for Marion's killer; they fit the profile of the traditional protagonists, but their scenes are intercut with Norman's scenes where he hides the evidence and confront the detective hired to find Marion. We learn more about Norman than we do about Lila and Sam, and it is possible to argue that Norman shares more screen time with the initial protagonist than they do. While the audience recognizes Norman as a villain or accomplice to the murder, they also view him as a victim to his mother, who had no choice but to do her bidding. The reveal that he was the murderer surprised so many of its 1960s audience because his appeal and possible protagonist status endeared him to the audience.

Stuffed birds seen during Marion and Norman's first conversation represent the theme of family and threat in this film. When Marion brings up his mother, Norman first acknowledges that he isn't happy with his mother; he would like to curse or leave her, sparking some emotion.

The camera frames his face, portrait-style, with a stuffed owl in the background, its wings spread in preparation to swoop down and claim its prey. When Norman talks about wanting to defy his mother, his head blocks the owl, but not entirely. We can see enough of the bird to not only assume, but know that it is a stuffed owl poised for the kill, its body directed toward Norman. When he says, “But I know I can’t,” he reclines back in his chair, revealing the rest of the owl, whose body is angled toward him. Even as Norman speaks about defying his mother, it’s empty words, because the threat is still visible behind him. There are two other stuffed birds, one advancing on the other, represent Marion and Norman, and it is telling that both stand at equal level. Even if one chases the other, they are still equals. The owl, on the other hand, is an unmistakable predator, and hovers above, able to kill both of the fighting birds. There are two prey and one predator, versus one prey and two predators. The owl is a better fit because of its cultural status as a figure of death: Even in death, his mother terrorizes him and others, and her caretaking only brings about death, in how she raised her son.

Based on Pinedo’s qualifications, I would classify *Psycho* as one of the first postmodern horror films, and the bridge between classical and postmodern. One notices the stark differences between *Psycho* and its sci-fi B-movie peers, such as the obvious lack of speculative fiction elements, although it shares common features with its peers. Both *Psycho* and films like *The Wolf Man* (1941) and *Attack of the 50-Foot Woman* (1958) blurred the lines between protagonist and antagonist, where audiences could sympathize with the villainous Other because of tragic back stories. However the lack of narrative closure, the internalization of conflict, and antagonistic depiction of domesticity distinguishes *Psycho* from its peers. The film does not conclude not on a bittersweet or reflective tone at the sympathetic Other’s demise, but with Norman Bates still alive, and completely succumbed to his Bad Mother’s haunted personality.

The film's final shot is not the film's surviving protagonists kissing and embracing for an optimistic, secured, unquestionable happy ending, but Norman's sinister smile with his mother's voice over, suggesting that the personality has taken over Norman.

*Psycho* is an important example of patriarchal antimaternalist horror cinema, even though the mother does not make one physical appearance (unless you count Norman dressed as her). The lack of physical presence emphasizes her threat, because it suits the notion of destructive maternal influence—the domineering mother's love harms the child's development and impacts his adult life. She haunts him forever. This relates to behavioral experts' concerns about WWII veterans and their co-dependence on their mother, how they argued soldiers' psyche could not cope with the separation from their mother, and “effeminized” them. We see this reflected in Norman's behavior, as he is typically meek, awkward, and soft-spoken. When he displays any aggression, it is only when Marion subtly criticizes his mother, and it is not a typical masculine aggression, but a quiet, passive anger. After this conversation, he engages with her sexually by peeking in her bedroom, as opposed to anything physical or upfront, another “non-masculine”, even childish trait. Her overbearing ways hindered his masculine sexual development, so he cannot approach women as a “real man” but watch them in private.

The film's resolution cements the patriarchal maternalist sentiments, as the psychologist suggests that she might have enforced a strict lifestyle on him. This may be speculation, and authorial intention, but the film and spectators blame Mrs. Bates for turning her son into a killer, and so perceive her as the true antagonist. She gets the last word, in a sinister tone. Even if it's an alternative personality of Norman or his perception of her, it is still Mrs. Bates speaking, and so she is the antagonist. It's not Norman's fault for killing her or other women; it is Mrs. Bates's fault for repressing his masculine authority and his sexuality, turning him into “Mamma's Boy.”

The revelation does not alter our opinion of Mrs. Bates—we still view her as the true villain, because of how she affected this otherwise appealing young man and his potential development. Perhaps if she wasn't his mother, he would have been an average, "well-developed" man.

And yet, it is possible to admire Mrs. Bates. She is an unstoppable, uncompromising force, even in death. Even if her motivations are steeped in gender essentialism, of being jealous of other women/rivals for her son's heart, she is a powerful antagonistic force, which gives her a power and authority over men. It challenges the gender interaction, so that woman does not equal victim, but instead equals predator, and man equals victim. This is another promising destabilization point that this film harbors, and shows the crack in gender essentialism along with Norman's (admittedly problematic) queer behavior.

*Rosemary's Baby*, on the other hand, focuses on the pregnant protagonist, Rosemary Woodhouse, and can be classified as a feminist maternalist film, as it addresses the feminine experience, specifically related to the problems of masculine authority figures or male-dominant fields that dealing with women, which Second Wave feminists concerned with motherhood wanted to speak out against. It is almost ironic for the film to critique these issues, considering it was directed by a man, a profession that often allows men to wield authority over actresses, but the points it raises is crucial and significant for its time, and for contemporary problems as well.

A young couple moves into an apartment filled with friendly, yet overbearing and nosy elderly folk. One night, Rosemary dreams about being raped by a demon; when she talks about it, her husband admits to having sex with her while she slept. She then becomes pregnant, but also terribly ill. At first she accepts the help of the elderly folk in her apartment, but after realizing that their home remedies make her worse, she suspects that they are witches wanting to kill her baby. Nobody believes her suspicions; they ignore her pleas, and subvert all her action.

In the end, she learns that the elderly folk and her husband are actually a Satanic cult that used her to mother the devil's child. Their plan succeeds at the end when she gives birth to a demonic child—and silently agrees to mother it.

*Rosemary's Baby* tightens the point of view to one character, Rosemary, so that the film's tense atmosphere and fear derives from Rosemary's paranoia. There is little distance to speak of, as she appears in every single shot of the film, so that her anxiety engulfs the spectator. We are meant to be as paranoid as her, even when the film provides "experts" like a male obstetrician to invalidate her concerns. While it is possible for audience members, particularly male viewers, to question Rosemary's fears as valid, women spectators would not question her anxiety. We believe as strongly as she does that the old people want her child, for some terrible reason, and that everybody is against her.

We maintain this close connection, because the film goes at great lengths to isolate her: There are no other relatable or sympathetic characters in the film, none that show any concern for her, with exception of friends that appear for only five minutes, and a father figure who dies at the hands of the cult. Rosemary bonds with the building's only other twenty-year-old resident, but she dies within the first act. Her husband also shows his true colors as a suspicious, even distasteful character early in the film when he supposedly admits to having sex with her when she fell asleep, after her disturbing rape dream. The scene highlights the husband's questionable behavior and authority over her by having him dressed in pajamas, and moving around while he speaks to her off camera, even talking over her questions. The camera continues to focus on her, naked, in bed, wrapped in pale yellow blankets, and while there is a shot of her breast, it focuses more on her back—this emphasizes her childlike appearance and mannerisms, painting her as a child to an authority figure that has abused his power and hurt her.

Most of the film depicts various male figures exerting their power over Rosemary, but none resonates more than the obstetrician whose help she begs for when she tries to run away. At first he seems completely trustworthy, for his office is sterile, which suggests a professional man. When she tries to tell him about her suspicions, it's the first time the camera stays off Rosemary, as though suggesting to the audience that he is trustworthy and will help Rosemary, since he is allowed to become the focus on the camera without Rosemary in it. However, he reclines back on his chair, and the distance between him and camera gives him a slight authorial power, as his head is above our line of sight, in comparison to Rosemary's profile that is level to our eyes. He clearly has power over Rosemary, able to help or betray her, because he is a male doctor that everybody trusts. She depends on him entirely, and truly believes he'll help her—which makes the audience also trust him. Therefore it's shocking and heartbreaking to the spectator when he betrays her, calling in her husband and the cult's leader, and only addresses the two men. He speaks above her and about her like she is an object or child or pet, saying how he's sorry for the problem. This conversation takes place in the hallway, where it is more sterile and consists of a white and a sickly pale yellow color scheme. It is more oppressive and empty atmosphere than his office, which had the illusion of comfort with a slight clutter of a bookcase and desk, and the illusion of hope and escape with a window, which noticeably had drawn curtains.

Part of what makes this film unique is its narrow focus and position. While it is debatable, it is safe to say that the film's horror reflects personal experience of a marginalized group, women, and the abuses forced upon them, as opposed to a boarder society or cultural period's anxieties. The internal threat is "normal" or hegemonic masculinity; not a grotesque monstrous Other, but a husband and doctor and elderly men. This may be why the child is never seen, because even though it is the devil's child, it isn't threat; it is still innocent in a sense.

Instead, men threaten Rosemary's life, which exemplify the anxieties and criticisms that feminist maternalists lobbied against patriarchal culture. *Rosemary's Baby* has no true narrative closure; the film ends on an ominous shot of Rosemary looking into the crib with a soft, enigmatic smile. This is an unnerving conclusion, because it suggests Rosemary's acquiescence at the end, compliance with her new fate in life to be a mother to a demon child, and adhere to the cult's wishes. She spent the whole movie fighting against their influence, but now she succumbs to their power. This then shows the importance of female solidarity that Second Wave Feminism preached, that women needed support, or they would fall victim to pressuring situations. And it is not Rosemary's fault: She does not comply with the patriarchal agenda, but she's forced into it. She's a typical female victim, but not so that a man can save her—if anything, the spectator wants to save the damsel from the man.

*Rosemary's Baby* is not perfect, and includes troubling implications. It goes to extreme lengths to emphasize Rosemary's victim state, rendering her more as a child and passive except for brief moments of action, such as her attempt to seek help from a doctor. It works in unsettling the audience, especially in her interactions with everybody else, including her husband, but it is not a new technique, as Victorian gothic narratives have also painted the women as passive childlike victims to dominating male figures.

However, there is a justifiable reason for this depiction, which brings up context. This film was released at the height of Second Wave Feminism, and few years prior to *Roe versus Wade* (1973), the famous Supreme Court case that determined women's legal rights to having abortions. *Rosemary's Baby* depicts a helpless, passive victim as its female character because it's representing a valid experience that women in the 1960s faced, and still do to this day, as *Roe versus Wade* did not solve or alleviate the controversy surrounding the topic of abortion.



Rosemary expresses the desire to have a child, and through the film she continuously voices her concern for her unborn child's safety, but it is still possible to interpret this story as promoting pro-choice. Rosemary's husband – or the devil – rapes her in order to conceive the child, not for Rosemary's sake but for others', and the baby drains her energy and sanity. The experience tortures her, and gives her no reward. Even if other academics did not read pro-choice elements in this film, the film still stands out as a narrative that focuses on female experience, depicting the sexual assault and gender-based subjugation that women endured, at the cost of their own subjectivity, to further another person's goals. It is an experience that resonated in the 1960s, and still resonates in contemporary society.

It is among the first postmodern horror films to depict a mother protagonist from her point of view, and there is a scant amount of those. Where *Psycho* concerned itself with the child and the destructive influence of oppressive mother's love, *Rosemary's Baby* depicts it in a sincere manner, where we empathize with Rosemary's protective instincts toward her child, and her desperation and failure to find any help is heartbreaking to watch. It is difficult to state whether Rosemary is a good mother or if the film attempts to set her to some ideal standard of motherhood, because she is pregnant, not a mother to a physical child. Instead, the film concerns itself with her anxiety and fear on a personal level, worrying about her wellbeing.

Unfortunately, these are traits that future films with mother protagonists ignore. *Rosemary's Baby's* potential traits pale as an influence, in comparison to *Psycho* which has implemented the Bad Mother as a common staple in horror films. This film has potential traits as portraying the struggles of the mother, and disrupting heteronormative traditions, but few films consider this. The 1970s transitions into feminist antimaternalist values, removing the maternal experience in order to criticize the hegemonic structure.

### **1970s – *Carrie* vs. *The Brood***

Brian de Palma's *Carrie* (1976) and David Cronenberg's *The Brood* (1979) have far more similarities, promoting antimaternalist criticisms through the theme of generational gap between mother and daughters, but their approaches, conclusions, implications, and goals differ. Where *Carrie* uses a female protagonist, namely the child of the Bad Mother, as the protagonist, which helps define it as a feminist antimaternalist text, *The Brood* looks through the husband's point of view, defining him as a better caretaker than his wife. Again, with the previous section, I will discuss the problematic implications of these films, but also focus on the potential of destabilizing heteronormative standards, and ask how these elements can contribute to a preferable solution in the future.

Based on a Stephen King novel, *Carrie* follows an abused and bullied teenage girl who develops psychic powers. At first she only uses her powers to build her confidence and break free from her religious mother's oppressive influence, but when she attends prom and becomes the victim of a terrible prank, she massacres her classmates, and then kills her mother and herself. Like Norman Bates, Carrie White is another example of protagonist/antagonist, a sympathetic, yet murderous Other figure; and like Rosemary the audience sees through her perspective for a majority of the film. The film addresses the struggles of adolescent alienation and socialization, which are Carrie's anxieties and desires respectively, and perpetuates the fear of stunted development, all from and for an adolescent perspective. However, the targeted demographic can include eighteen to thirty-nine-year-old adults, who clashed with their parents or political authorities that produced the dominant conservative hegemony that the countercultural Baby Boomers – from mild and non-identified to extreme and self-proclaimed – criticized. The fear is not Carrie slaughtering her classmates or even her deadly psychic abilities.

The fear is that her mother's warning is right: Everybody all laughed at (and rejected) her, and there is no place for individuals that do not conform to the hegemony.

This film might have especially resonated with Second Wave feminists that criticized their housewife mothers, and blamed them for enabling the patriarchy oppression of women. Indeed, Carrie's mother Margaret rivals Mrs. Bates in terms of notorious Bad Mothers, for different reasons, primarily because of the gendered mother-child relationship and social context. Where Mrs. Bates and Norman reflect the patriarchal antimaternalist worries of emasculation, Margaret and Carrie represent a feminist antimaternalist argument that decries against feminine domestic and passive conduct, and advocates for female empowerment. The fundamentalist Christian Margaret represses her daughter so much that she stunts her sexual development, causing Carrie to start menstruating at sixteen. She considers everything related to reproduction and sexuality as dirty, including birthing her own daughter, and so repents for these alleged sins by abusing her daughter. Feminists can find Carrie empowering as she tries to break from her mother's grasp, and takes revenge on the hegemonic "norm" that shunned and derided her.

At the same time, however, *Carrie* perpetuates reductive and generalized values of gender and sexuality. Carrie's power is tied to her sexuality, as it manifests not only after she "becomes a woman" through female biology. This applies an abjection reading: Carrie establishes her selfhood by shedding menstrual blood, which is "feminine filth," but she also develops a malevolent vengeance, using her powers to strike back at those who mock or abuse her. Therefore, Carrie gains selfhood through menstrual blood, but it is a malevolent selfhood, because it is feminine and primal. Her power is tied to her emotional state, strengthened by anger; she flies off into a murderous rampage upon public humiliation. This makes the associations that femininity is emotional and filthy; it is necessary to expel this traits.

On the surface level, Carrie is a more active, empowered female character, one who harbors a great power that allows her to destroy her enemies. She also engenders sympathy for the Other—she may not be a “queer” character like Norman, but she is an ostracized outcast. She’s also an adolescent girl, which broadens representation in mainstream cinema, so while she is an antagonist, even male spectators can empathize with her experience, and by extension other women’s issues, similar to *Rosemary’s Baby*. However, I would consider *Rosemary’s Baby* as more challenging to the patriarchal hegemonic rhetoric, more so than *Carrie*, only because *Carrie* depicts her mother as a Bad Mother, and an extreme example of that, which then puts specific female experience in a hierarchy. This neglects the mother’s position or experience, and not only does it evaluate motherhood, but it uses it as a platform to criticize a larger institutional structure that imposed these problems. Margaret has very few scenes of herself in a vulnerable or sympathetic position, so the spectator also views her as an antagonist, much in the same fashion as Mrs. Bates from *Psycho*. The key difference is that *Carrie* has feminist elements to itself, yet it blames a feminine experience, motherhood, for helping to enforce patriarchal hegemonic traditions, which is the inherent problem with feminist maternalism.

*The Brood* shares similar elements: It also focuses on a woman, Nola Carveth, who develops strange powers after freeing her repressed psyche and unleashing her anger and vengeance. In Nola’s case, this power manifests into child-like monsters “born” from her emotions that do her bidding, mostly killing people that have wronged her like her abusive mother. However, the story is also about her ex-husband, Frank, and his fight for custody over their daughter Candice when he discovers Nola abusing her. He tries to protect Candice, going so far as to strangle his ex-wife when her brood captures her daughter. In this story, Nola is the antagonist, and the film does not focus on her physical presence or perspective through the film.

There are scenes showing her therapy session, during which she recounts her family's abuse, and the conclusion, where she exists namely through the murderous brood. However, it is Frank who is the protagonists, the primary point-of-view; we focus Frank's efforts to keep his daughter.

Like *Rosemary's Baby*, the mother in this film is a young woman – although she is not conventionally pregnant – but it maintains more antimaternalist sentiment. What's interesting, however, is that the antimaternalist sentiment is not lobbied against an elderly oppressive mother: The film tells us that Nola's mother Juliana was abusive – which she admits – yet her portrayal on screen as Candice's grandmother is surprisingly gentle and quiet, showing no overt signs of being an mother. This still resonates with the common antimaternalist criticism of maternal influence on childhood development, as we clearly see how her past abuse has so negatively affected Nola, but it is difficult to make that connection between the Juliana we see, and the Juliana she supposedly was. Where *Carrie* stewes in anger and wants vengeance, this film suggests that things can change, people can be redeemed. So this can happen with film, and with social issues. It is possible to redeem past problems, and change for the future's sake, rather than wallowing in anger.

However, the same cannot be said for Nola, as the movie lobbies the antimaternalist argument against her. Unlike *Carrie*, which decries parents and the past, *The Brood* worries about the future, and how the generation of that film will affect their children. It still raises the issue of motherhood, but places the responsibility and blame in the contemporary, in the current young adults/parents. We see this difference reflected in the films' ambivalent conclusions and implications. Carrie tries to reconcile with Margaret White, who instead tries to kill her, but even after killing her mother, Carrie embraces her corpse while the burning house collapses around them. Carrie dooms herself, a prisoner to the past, and refusing redemption, change, or empathy.

In contrast, Nola dies, but as Frank drives away with Candice, we see the same pustules that Nola had on Candice's skin, showing how abuse can perpetuate. Nola is a victim to her mother's abuse and father's neglect, her dysfunctional psychology, and her maternal impotence "nurtured" by a dysfunctional childhood. But nobody seems to acknowledge this underlying problem, or that she inherited this behavior from her mother. Her only possibly ally may be Dr. Raglan, who tries to help her acknowledge her feelings of maternal impotence, but he also nurtures her anger, suggesting that people are more comfortable with lingering in the past, versus finding future resolutions and changing. This film stands out because sympathizes and criticizes all individuals and aspects in the narrative: Men and women, parents and children, old and present generations, institutions and authoritative influences *and* individual choice and development. Each member is possible of redemption and changing for the better, but they also harbor destructive traits, which makes them complex characters. Each character maintains their subjectivity. More importantly, Nola keeps it, and we sympathize with her position even though she is a mother antagonist.

It's hard to classify this film's rhetoric as patriarchal like *Psycho* or feminist like *Carrie*, because it has elements of both, and yet follows a different concluding trajectory. It doesn't criticize or deify maternal love; instead, it shows maternal impotence, where the mothers Juliana and Nola are not evil, but incompetent at providing that ideal maternal love. The film repeats the tradition of the Bad Mother, in the sense that both mother characters abuse their child, but it is not generalizing or imposing strict, evaluative standards upon all mothers. This film shows an individual case that consists of a cycle of abuse, and allows the audience to relate to Juliana, Nola, and Candice, to see them in vulnerable situations and thus sympathize with them.

Furthermore, the film takes repeats the tradition of using the family in order to stabilize society after a tragic event, but it takes a different approach, where it focuses on paternal love.

We follow Frank's efforts to protect his daughter, how he fights against a legal system influenced by maternalist attitude, which believes that the mother should have custody over the child - unless there is irrevocable proof of an unsuitable environment – because of maternal love. When we have Nola's scenes, she expresses a desire to look after her daughter, but she gives no justification—she seems more concerned about image of a good family, wanting to get back together with her husband, so she kills his girlfriend, and kidnaps Candice in an attempt to get his attention. Frank, on the other hand, has less selfish motivations; he wants to keep Candice to himself not for his own sake, but for Candice's. However, fatherhood is not deified; the film presents Nola's father as an alcoholic who complied with Juliana's abuse against Nola, which is why he dies. Furthermore, Frank acts in extreme ways, confronting and killing Nola, showing little remorse over her death, and driving off with Candice. There is still a problem that the film disregards or villainizes mothers, but it still posits a challenge to the domestic sphere and heteronormative traditions that classify nurture as strictly maternal and feminine traits. It also does not compare fatherhood to motherhood, or suggest that one parent is better than the others—but it presents alternative parenting and non-idealized family structures as a point of stabilization. Even films like *Rosemary's Baby* and *Carrie* conform to gender essentialism, but *The Brood* offers an alternative family dynamic to repeat traditions in a new, challenging light.

*The Brood* complicates the portrayal of motherhood. Even though it paints Nola in a negative and distanced light, she did not become abusive overnight—she suffers from a history of abusive and repressed memories. She embodies the strange union of mother antagonists and “child” characters (that is, the offspring of the mother character), meant to caution the film's demographic – who would be about the same age – that while they may be victims, they should not stew in anger, because they'll turn out like their parents, and possibly harm their children.

The film also does well in deconstructing the gender norm by showing a loving, attentive father, and while it's not the only challenging trajectory, it is a good one to consider.

However, horror films have neglected *The Brood*, and taken more inspiration from *Psycho* and *Carrie*, continuing to portray Bad Mothers antagonists that negatively affect their children's development in the hegemonic-appropriate standards. They also portray passive, victimized mother protagonists, oftentimes paired with a husband who becomes the film's primary character, like *The Shining* (1980). In those cases, the mother is passive because she is a woman, and not because the film is making a deliberate point about feminine victimization. These have contributed to a new representation of the mother, and a new narrative formula: The active good mother protagonist.

### **The Mother Protagonist Maternal Horror Formula**

By Good Mother protagonist, I mean a mother character who displays Sigwart's good mother traits of attentive devotion to the child's wellbeing. The mother character does not necessarily need to start the film as a Good Mother, but she must show some evidence of these traits, either by undergoing a character arc or hints at elements of maternal love. Ripley from *Aliens* (1986) is a well-known example of initial active good mother character because she and the child character Newt have a good rapport from the beginning of their relationship. Sarah Conner from *Terminator 2* (1991) is a developing Good Mother; she struggles to connect with her son John, and must work to show him her affection, which complicates the mother-child relationship by showing Sarah suffering from understandable maternal impotence.

While these two films are the best known examples, it is Gore Verbinski's *The Ring* (2001) adaptation that establishes the mother protagonist maternal horror narrative formula that we will see replicated in the next two chapters, which will conclude this chapter's discussion.



The formula exhibits significant traits taken from the four previous films, among others, traits that include a Good Mother protagonist, a Bad Mother antagonist or supporting character, a child character, and maternalist rhetoric. It may be redundant to call it the mother protagonist maternal horror formula, but I distinguish this from the maternal horror narrative, because not all maternal horror contain mother protagonists, so this is a sub-section. Therefore, mother protagonist maternal horror uses motherhood as a significant theme, typically as an anxiety, but also as a resolution. Most mother protagonist narratives resolve the anxiety through patriarchal maternalist rhetoric, influencing *and* influenced by a contemporary millennial context, which further perpetuates evaluative traditions Good versus Bad mothering, and heteronormative gender roles.

Before that, we must briefly examine the differences between this text and the original Japanese film, *Ringu* (1998). *The Ring* follows the same basic plot: A reporter tracks the story of a cursed video tape that kills anyone who watches it in seven days. She and her son – at different times – watch the tape’s mysterious, disturbing content, and, with the help of her ex-husband, who also watches the tape, looks for a way to stop the curse. She discovers the truth of a family with a murdered daughter. She digs the corpse up as a way to free the spirit, but to no avail, as her ex-husband dies from the evil ghost. The major difference lies in the ghost’s back story, which changes the implications. Both films reveal that the parents of the ghosts kill their daughter, but where the original showed the father doing the deed, the mother in *The Ring* kills Samara, possibly to emphasize the theme of motherhood. This alteration demonstrates the American hegemonic culture’s anxiety about motherhood by projecting a murderous Bad Mother to explain Samara’s tragic back story and vengeful rampage, similar to *Psycho*, *Carrie*, and *The Brood*. It is possible to see this film reflecting the insecurities of the future that the transition into the twenty-first century evoked, which included technology, family life, and domestic affairs.

Samara, the victim of a Bad Mother, becomes a dangerous and unstoppable ghost, killing people through a curse video tape. Rachel needs to become a Good Mother in order to save her son's life, and preserve the family structure.

On the one hand, the change makes sense because it parallels Rachel Keller's journey to save her son from the curse: One mother kills her (adopted) daughter, another saves her son. The change also strengthens the fake-climax or psych-out, where both mother protagonists find the well in which respective ghosts died in, and try to free the vengeful spirit through the power of maternal love. In both cases, it is a redeeming point for the mother protagonist as both are initially career-driven single women who put work before their sons, but through this mystery they learn to become more attentive and loving mothers; by trying to uncover the truth and show the spirits maternal love, they display a willingness to change and become better mothers for their sons. However, in *The Ring* this theme becomes more prominent and overt as they changed the murderous parent from the father to the mother. Maternal love makes sense as the "cure" for Samara's vengeful ways, because her mother never showed her loved, and even kills her.

On the other hand, this change blames mothers for causing the film's problems, and presents a prototype of a mother protagonist maternal horror formula theme: Good versus Bad Mother. The original Japanese film shows little interaction between Sadako and her psychic mother, but we can assume that they had a loving one, as Sadako gets angry and attacks reporters who question her mother's abilities. In *The Ring* we see another example of a Bad Mother, the abusive parent who negatively influenced her daughter's development and behavior. Her mother has no love for her, so she kills her daughter in cold blood. Where the original shows her father killing his daughter for the sake of the world, to protect them from her powers, *The Ring* focuses more on a mother driven insane by her child, and thus killing her on a more personal motivation.

This might be fine, if the theme of motherhood wasn't so prominent, which then frames Samara's mother as a Bad Mother, much like Norman and Carrie's mothers.

Not only does this rationalize Samara's vengeful spirit, but this portrayal also acts as a point of comparison for Rachel, the active Good Mother protagonist: It tells her (and the audience) that this is what she may become if she continues to be a Bad Mother – to “allow” maternal impotence to guide her life – so she must change her ways. This is similar to Sarah Conner's character arc in *Terminator 2*, where the plot concerns her development into a better mother for her child; it is a common trajectory for the active good mother protagonist, especially for the Good vs. Bad Mother attribute of the formula, although it does not happen for all narratives. This also exists in the original film: While the film changes significant details such as the parent responsible for Samara's death, it maintains the improvement arc of the mother character. She starts off as a neglectful parent, incapable of displaying outward affection, but then becomes more attentive and devoted when the antagonistic force threatens her child's life. This antagonistic force may sometimes be the Bad Mother, but it can also be the Bad Mother's offspring, showing the consequences of poor mothering, just like Norman and Carrie.

It is important to state that the neglectful mother is not intentionally malicious or dismissive, but she suffers from maternal impotence—in Rachel's case, her career is her top priority, and so she leaves her son at home, without a babysitter, while she chases down mysteries. While maternal impotence complicates the character as well as the notion of pure maternal love, films like *The Ring* disregard the mother's standpoint. We consider her neglectful of her son because she leaves him home alone and does not pay attention to his school work. There are only two standards, Good or Bad Mothers, which society assesses based on whether the mother expresses perfect maternal love, and does not suffer from any maternal impotence.

This film, and by extension American culture, does not recognize how this pressure contributes to maternal impotence, or acknowledge that there is no perfect mother in contemporary society. The two-parent household is no longer the norm, so the single working mother must sacrifice her time with her child in order to provide a secure home for them. It is a patriarchal maternalist rhetoric because it wants the mother to conform to a heteronormative domestic standard. On the surface it presents an active mother, but it also criticizes Rachel's focus on her career instead of on her son. Unlike *Rosemary's Baby* that addresses the concerns of social pressures placed upon a woman, this film tells us Rachel must get better, or she may be like Samara's Bad Mother.

There are positive attributes to the active good mother protagonist, expressed by Rachel: She is a single mother who is independent from masculine influence. Her motivations and actions do not exist for a man's sake, and she investigates and solves the mystery by herself. Her ex-husband helps, but he does not share the focus or perspective with Rachel. Where the Japanese film shows both the reporter and her ex-husband discovering the truth, Rachel investigates all by herself. She does not demonstrate any physical affection with her ex-husband, as they rarely share any scenes together, except for the conclusion, but even then, they do not have any tender moments. The horror genre suffers from accusations of misogyny, but the active good mother protagonist is a positive female character that could relate to and empower female spectators. These narratives rarely illustrate the sexual objectification of women, and instead focus on the feminine experience. Of course, these films also frame the audience as children, in the sense that we do not empathize with the mother character on the parental anxieties, but rather as children ourselves observing and judging an example of motherhood. Yet spectators, especially female, can still relate to the mother characters and the themes of feminine experience, and so the active Good Mother protagonist can initiate more female-oriented narratives.

Furthermore, while *The Ring* establishes the narrative formula, it also subverts the conclusion of maternal love triumphing. The film provides the faux-ending of Rachel putting Samara's spirit to rest through finding her corpse and showing her maternal love, but when she tells her son, he exclaims that Rachel only helped Samara—which then cuts to Samara killing the ex-husband. The reason Rachel survived the curse was because she copied the tape, and so must copy it again and show it to somebody else so that Aidan doesn't die. In a sense, then, she is expressing maternal love to save her son, but in a malicious way that continues the curse and allows the antagonist to win in the end. It coincides with postmodern horror's lack of narrative closure and internal threat: Domesticity and maternal love causes our problems, but it can't fix it.

## **Conclusion**

Not all narratives adhere to this conclusion, and instead provide optimistic narrative closure through the power of maternal love. Yet *The Ring* destabilizes the domestic structure, and to an extent heteronormative gender roles. Instead of ending with a rejoined two-parent household, it suggests that Rachel and her son will stay together, at the cost of others' lives. There is no need for a father figure, because she has improved her maternal skills and ability. This enforces the gender role of a nurturing mother, but it also projects the notion that a single mother is capable of raising a child. The mother-child bond is no longer perceived as negative or requiring masculine intervention, which suggests a shift from antimaternalism to maternalism. However this does not necessarily imply positive change. Rather, it suggests a different haunting that still enforces high standards on mothers, and emphasizing the mother-child bond less for the possible empowerment of a marginalized group, and more for the sake of society needing a stabilizing point. There is evidence of a patriarchal maternalist rhetoric influencing these mother protagonist maternal horror narratives, which we will see in the next two chapters.

I do not want to compare maternalism or antimaternalism as the better option over the other, but say these are boundaries that set up predictable expectations. Yes, we can let them guide us, as the feminist rhetoric of both sentiments harbor promise for change – letting the women’s voices be heard – and to celebrate motherhood through maternalism, while recognizing through antimaternalism that mothers are not perfect caretakers. However, we also must recognize that the patriarchal and feminist rhetoric of both maternalism and antimaternalism still constrict our understandings of social structure, and set up the predictable future full of cycling. Instead, we need to ask how we can use the promises in these values to better develop social thought and voice, especially in concerns with domesticity and women. How can we detract from the issue of Good versus Bad Mothers, and refocus the efforts on the issue of representation and institutional influence?

The problems seen in these five films have not changed—in fact, they set up the mother protagonist maternal horror formula that the next two chapters, and other films, replicate. At the same time, their potential has also inspired similar promises. And like the five films, *Silent Hill* and *Mama* are redeemable, and can posit solutions to the problems of patriarchal hegemony. They offer a base template that is possible to alter, with elements that are both negative and positive, full of problems and promises. By understanding both, we can posit a solution to the maternal horror genre, and by extension mainstream American culture.

## Chapter Two: “Mother is God in the Eyes of a Child”

The previous chapter concluded on a brief analysis of *The Ring*, which can be classified as the first example of the mother protagonist maternal horror formula, which inspired films like Christophe Gans’s *Silent Hill* (2006). While *The Ring* hints at patriarchal maternalist values, *Silent Hill* enables them despite superficial attempts to engage with feminist values. After contextualizing anxieties about destabilization and how they affect social attitudes toward women and mothers, we will compare the film to the original video game narrative, in order to discuss the narrative’s gender essentialist implication that equates femininity with motherhood. Furthermore, this chapter will examine how (and why) each text corroborates and challenges the hegemonic traditions. It’s necessary to examine the film as an adaptation, not only because the changes causes the narrative to comply with the formula that we discuss, but it also provides the best evidence – through authorial intent and execution – of American cultural influence that imposes themes of motherhood upon narratives.

Through these assessments, I will argue that American culture relies on maternalism to stabilize society through implement gender roles. American culture neglects to recognize the problems of repeating spectral social traditions that put pressure and expectations on femininity *and* masculinity. It is possible to engage these specters and reconsider new resolutions to displace prevalent anxieties that detriment social progress. It is necessary to stabilize American society in the aftermath of traumatic events, like the various anxieties that the 2000s face, but it does not need to be the same, stagnant patriarchal traditions.

## **A Post 9/11 Culture**

As discussed in the introduction, postmodern films relocate the site of horror to the internal, and hint that the hegemonic American family harbors darker secrets than the Other. Tony Williams brings up the significance of family in American culture, stating: “The family plays a significant role in any society determining everyone’s psychic and social formation according to changing historical, political, and ideological dimensions.” The prominent counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s that influenced American horror cinema codes the hegemonic two-parent household “...as an institutional prop of bourgeois capitalism, producing colonized subjects and reproducing ideological values.” In order to destabilize or criticize the culture, “[f]ilmic representations often depict traumatic disturbances by using formal codes of supernatural horror and spectacular violence.” (Williams 14). This best summarizes the academic scholarship discussed in Chapter One, and contributes to the argument that American culture relies heavily on the family as a representation for hegemonic standards, whether it is lauded or criticized. However, Williams raises the point:

Although the Reagan era attempted to restore family values by attacking feminism and restoring male hegemony, it also saw the massive destruction of male-dominated heavy industries, resulting in high unemployment and the creation of low-income ‘feminine’ service jobs and the destabilization of patriarchal family foundations. Gender roles fell into crisis ...The traditional family was finished. (Williams 19)

I am inclined to agree with his observations at first, because the 1980s has overseen the creation of well-known female protagonists like Sarah Conner, Ripley, and Nancy Thompson, developing active, relatable feminist icons in mainstream culture, which challenges the patriarchal tradition.



It also perpetuates postmodern horror cinema tropes, in spite of the Reagan administration's attempts to reassert hegemonic traditions. Williams' observations reflect this thesis's main point: That postmodern horror has potential to resist and change societal efforts to return to repression; and instead repeat traditions to produce progressive cultural resolutions. Of course, not all horror films released in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to these positive destabilizing trajectories—many films contained violently misogynistic themes, generating the common trope of killing sexually active women. Most films also continued to include Bad Mother antagonists, such as *Mother's Day* (1980) and *Mother's Boys* (1994). However, the more culturally memorable horror films – at least those that are often referenced in mainstream and pop culture articles – generally confront conservative patriarchal values. Instead of returning to a “stabilized norm,” we find 1980s and 1990s horror continuing the countercultural confrontation against repression and conformist tradition.

However, the context of the 2000s differs from the 1960s and 1970s. The 60s and 70s horror films addressed internal anxieties and problems – including the Vietnam War and the public attention to controversial actions taken by the government and soldiers – and so use the horror genre to initiate destabilization and criticize the hegemonic norm. The problems in the 2000s revitalizes the old fear of the Other, the not-us (US), which inspires rhetoric of national unity and defense, at the expense of marginalized groups. 9/11 is one of numerous anxieties in the 2000s, but it is a significant factor. 9/11 was a terrorist attack committed by non-Westerners, who deliberately destroyed well-known American icons – New York City and the Pentagon – on our soil. Where the Vietnam War of the 1960s inspired protest against the hegemony, 9/11 inspired hegemonic unity, to defend ourselves against the Other—much like how Pearl Harbor inspired Americans to participate in World War II.

Again, it is one significant factor and anxiety that the 2000s faced, but it encouraged a return to old traditions for comfort and security. Susan Faludi's text, *The Terror Dream* (2007) disputes Williams' claims that "the traditional family was finished," as Faludi discusses the attack on feminism and women's rights that post-9/11 culture enabled. She writes, "Within days of the attack, a number of media venues sounded the death knell of feminism" and cites various quotes that called feminism unnecessary for and the cause of 9/11, describing in great detail the fervent patriarchal masculine rhetoric that criticized feminism for pacifying or softening the nation (Faludi 21-5). This is further corroborated by Jennifer Skinnon's (2011) observations that "...fear continues to color U.S. culture and has paved the way for continued renewal and new acceptance of traditional gender roles. This can be seen clearly in the current ideology of motherhood, society's defining role for women," which emphasizes the notion that "the central function of mothers in contemporary popular culture seems to be serving others through their reproductive capabilities" that ultimately provides "a cultural imperative that elevates manhood back to its 'proper' position whereby men provide protection in an uncertain world" (Skinnon 57, 69). American masculinity defines itself by its authoritative relationship over femininity, which enforces expectations on both genders to limited roles and capabilities.

Faludi points out an important contradiction: 9/11 and the war on terror gave the illusion that America fought for freedom, including the freedom of oppressed women in the Middle East. The initial impression was that we would fight against sexual inequality, yet our culture was also very critical of American women and/or feminists that expressed non-hegemonic interests outside of men, family, and patriotism. While we would fight for Middle-Eastern women's rights to dress as they wished, we would also deride American women who wore too much make-up or dressed provocatively. Fighting for "women's rights" was actually about masculine ego:

“Afghanistan was a metaphor for the girl, the nation as a female captive abducted by molesting desperadoes and waiting passively for virile America to save her from degradation” (Faludi 38-44). Saving the women is a myth crucial to American culture, she notes:

The domestic fantasy in which we have dwelled since the attack, wasn’t improvised just to deal with 9/11...the heroic ideal of the knight in shining armor and his damsel in distress is, of course, common to all cultures. But the monomyth...assumes a particular shape and plays a particular role in American life. After all, the British didn’t invoke Lancelot or invent a Guinevere to weather the trauma of the terrorist bombing... America’s wilderness history has given that horary ideal a complexion and prominence it enjoys nowhere else. (Faludi 200)

I do believe that 9/11 incited fear and extremist patriarchal rhetoric as a coping mechanism. However, I also want to dispute the notion that contemporary culture has reverted fully to patriarchal roots, particularly when she describes her observations as “the post-9/11 disappearances of feminist and liberal female voices” (Faludi 39). Men’s right activists and their attacks on women proliferate the Internet, often through public harassment and shame tactics, yet we also find responses to these tactics, people who condemn their behavior and words (Lee). Furthermore, while cinema continues to perpetuate the female victim or damsel in distress that the male protagonist/hero must save and the male antagonist/villain must molest, she neglects to address the prominence of female protagonists in popular culture. At the time of her book’s publication, films like Kevin Lima’s *Enchanted* (2007), Adam Shankman’s *Hairspray* (2007), Jason Reitman’s *Juno* (2007), and Gore Verbinski’s *Pirates of the Caribbean: At World’s End* (2007) resisted the notion of the damsel in distress, and/or depicted relatable female experience.

While I focus on two films, the 2000s has produced multiple mother protagonist maternal horror films, like J.A. Bayona's *The Orphanage* (2007) and Oliver Hirschbiegel's *The Invasion* (2007).

However, I also want to extend her observations of motherhood, and how it applies to patriarchal fantasies. Contemporary maternal horror films often reflect patriarchal maternalist values by emphasizing maternal love for the sake of the children and societal stability, and reinforcing gender roles based on heterosexual divisions. Heteronormative traditions still haunt American culture, and even if we resist and alter the course, any traumatic event can revive the sentiments and rejuvenate patriarchal language. "The suddenness of the attacks...left us with little in the way of ongoing chronicle or ennobling narrative. So a narrative was created and populated with pasteboard protagonists whose exploits exist almost entirely in the realm of American archetype and American fantasy" (Faludi 64). We rely on past traditions for a national identity and cultural sense of security. Even when we supposedly adhere to countercultural values and rally against hegemonic authority, we still rely on some stabilizing point, typically built upon historic constructions of the family and gender roles. Even when we wanted to destroy the traditional family in the 1970s, we relied on the mother-child bond to maintain some foundation. We put such strong standards on motherhood because of this dependence, of wanting future generations – and ourselves – to receive the best nurturing and security. We still associate the past to motherhood, and that is why we expect mothers to repeat these traditions.

Even if I dispute Faludi and Skinnon's arguments of extremist patriarchal conformity, I agree that we are afraid of the future. The events in the 2000s especially shook our confidence; not only did we face 9/11 and terrorist attacks, but we also suffered through financial crises, mortgage anxieties, mainstream cultural instability, etc. And I emphasize the significance of recognizing these issues, because it is possible to redirect these past anxieties into a new future.

By discussing how and why the past haunts American society, we can address the separation of spheres that divides American citizens by gender and sexuality – which prioritizes masculine men over other social groups – and causes various anxieties related to expectations. Stunted development in children is a legitimate concern. However, 1950s postwar behavioral experts were concerned about emasculation and adult men lacking “appropriate masculine traits,” which caused them to blame mothers, and by extension women. This repeats in contemporary context in regards to 9/11, of patriarchal pundits fearing emasculation because of feminism and gay rights. Neither context asks if patriarchy and hyper- masculinity detriment healthy development, because of the stigmatic pressure placed upon both genders. If we bring out these specters, if we point out the hauntings, we can start to resolve them by asking the true nature to the problems.

Faludi highlights the “mommies at home”; “a helpless family circle in need of protection...[a] show of feminine frailty” (Faludi 144-5). These generalizations ignore the Good Mother protagonists in horror films like *Silent Hill*, who do not stay at home, but rather save their children. Skinnon also forgets the trope of the “Mother Bear” that is equally celebrated in American culture, of a protective mother that fights for her children’s safety. But both the “helpless family circle” and the Good Mother protagonist rely on gender essentialism of “feminine nurturing behavior,” and this raises the question, why it has to be women.

One might respond with the obvious answers: “It’s all biology, physical and hormonal: Women and men are built for different tasks” or “Women birth their children and lactate so they must devote their lives to them, and develop closer bonds” or “It’s a part of our culture and the best way to organize society” (Chodorow 13). Both maternalist and antimaternalist advocates construct their arguments on these assumptions, and as we discussed, there are fallacies to their arguments; they both contain poignant conclusions, but they also suffer from problematic faults.

This is not to say that mothering is malevolent or unnecessary, or that natural maternal instincts do not exist, but we must ask this question in order to understand how motherhood contributes to lingering mainstream social constructions, even in a progressive contemporary context.

The responses or assumptions of motherhood that I have mentioned are very similar: They rely on binary gender and sexual definitions, and traditional biological parenthood. While some academics have challenged the specifics of these notions, few do so in a comprehensive manner as well as Nancy Chodorow in *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978). Here I realize that the context of this text's publication is important, because she's not only criticizing patriarchal or fundamentalist justifications for motherhood and female oppression. Her argument also addresses Second Wave extreme feminists that rejected and derided individual mothers. In the introduction, I mentioned Umansky's text, *Motherhood Reconceived*, who explains that certain extreme Second Wave feminists dismissed wives and mothers as "traitors" to the feminist cause because they had families. This is why Chodorow discusses the "role-training argument" in which "women's mothering, like other aspects of gender activity, is a production of feminine role training and role identification," and so "share[s] the assumption that women's mothering is a product of behavioral conformity and individual intention." However, she argues "women's mothering does not exist in isolation. It is a fundamental constituting feature of the sexual division of labor ... structurally and causally related to other institutional arrangements and to ideological formulations which justify the sexual division of labor" (Chodorow 32-3). Not all women choose to become mothers or wives, or realize that alternative options exist. If a woman chooses to marry and have children, it may be her choice, but it may also be because she doesn't realize (and in many cases actually does not) have a choice to choose a non-domestic lifestyle. These are points that feminists antimaternalists neglected to consider.

Chodorow's arguments coincide with Second Wave feminist maternalists, who did not fault wives and mothers for participating in the domestic sphere – partly because they celebrated the notion of maternal love and natural feminine compassion – and criticized the institution. Chodorow points out that “Sexual inequality is itself embedded in and perpetuated by the organization of these institutions”—that is, economic and social institutional aspects and structures, which change at different points of time in Western civilization (Chodorow 32-5). This best reflects the power of spectral social structures, because while individual cultures and specific context can produce different gender roles and behaviors, certain constructions will benefit the national hegemony and economy and so imbue itself into the mainstream conscious, and influence future generations. The various gender essentialist arguments may derive from scientific or behavioral research guided by patriarchal values that have repeated themselves so much to the point of becoming established assumptions. So many factors have contributed to repeating the sexual inequalities, and it has prevailed so much in our societies, so both women (and men) believe that female biology equals femininity, which equals nurturing behavior, which equals domesticity.

I don't mean to say that cis-gendered women who have given birth do not have maternal instincts at all, nor do I mean to suggest that all women want to lead active lifestyles. But it's easy to see how hegemonic society can take certain psychic experiences and enforce it upon groups for the idea of stability. Taking the nurturing inclinations of mothers, and forcing it upon all women, provides a sense of stability and cultural identity. But if we recognize that these values are haunting our social structure, we can project new social constructions to produce a new, more unified stability that does not place pressure on both femininity *and* masculinity.

However, Hollywood projects the same gender essentialist values, depicting Good and Bad Mothers, and celebrating or blaming motherhood. The mother in the relationship does not matter, so it doesn't matter if she suffers from maternal impotence or not. If she fails to satisfy the requirements of perfect maternal love, she must amend her flaws, no matter what the cost. These notions are part of the reason gender essentialism still haunts dominant hegemonic society, why we define lifestyles and individuals according to appropriate heteronormative behavior, and perpetuates the infrastructure while avoiding conversation about the outside societal factors. If we forget this, and just focus on praising or decrying individual mothers as generalizing examples, it results in films like *The Ring* or *Silent Hill*.

### **“Have You Seen a Little Girl?”**

Academia often advises analyses to ignore authorial intention, because the text's meaning derives from audience reception, not production or what the author meant to “say” or “do.” This is especially important in the case of film adaptations or remakes, because adaptations alter elements from the material. Changes are necessary, because media like literature require different attributes for storytelling purposes, or because the director must adjust context for a contemporary or different language-speaking audience. This does not mean changes will always benefit or disadvantage the narrative. Audience reception varies between each text, and so while authorial intentions may provide insight into the purpose behind changes, the film needs to stand on its own merit, whether as a stand-alone text or in comparison to the original material. *The Ring* is an English adaptation of a Japanese horror film, and I discussed the possible rationale for those changes—but I did not search out any text or audio of Verbinski explaining his decisions.

However, in the case of *Silent Hill* (2006), the film adaptation of the video game, *Silent Hill* (1999), I want to address director Christophe Gans's stated authorial intentions for analysis.



He explains why he changed the game protagonist's gender from a man to a woman, and it applies to my argument about gender essentialism haunting our society. This is a case of authorial intention overtly influencing the execution of the material, and so cannot be dismissed.

Gans had a goal, and he executed it. He states:

We realized after two weeks in the writing process that Harry was actually motivated by feminine, almost maternal feelings. To be true to the character, it was very odd and difficult to write for him. He worked fine in the game, but for a real actor, it was too strange. It's not that he's effeminate, but he's acting like a woman. So if we wanted to keep the character, we would have to change other aspects of him, but it seemed like a mockery to keep a guy called Harry Mason and change everything about his character. (Gans)

This statement reveals inherent, overt gender essentialism that guided Gans' decisions in the adaptations, and I cannot ignore this authorial intention statement because it shows how Hollywood directors will pass up the opportunity to challenge the hegemonic structure, and intentionally allow heteronormative values to haunt their work, and thus haunt the audience and mainstream culture. It is troubling, because the movie exhibits feminist potential that criticizes societal expectations placed upon women, especially in its conclusion. I will discuss those elements as ways to redeem and destabilize traditions, but Gans fails on this feminist promise.

But before I can analyze the film, I must talk about the original source material, and discuss how it helps destabilizes the hegemonic structure, as a basis of comparison to the film's changes. In 1999 Japanese developer and publishing company Konami released on the PlayStation 1 console *Silent Hill*, the first title of the *Silent Hill* survival horror game franchise.

In order to avoid confusion, we will refer to this specific video game as *Silent Hill 1* or *SH1*, the franchise as *SH*, and the film as *Silent Hill*. Each title in the franchise focuses on different characters and plotlines, but all relate to the setting, a mysterious, abandoned small American resort town filled with monsters, and which turns into a hellish dimension called the Otherworld.

*SH1* follows a single father named Harry Mason, whose car crashes near the town; when he wakes up, he realizes his adopted daughter, Cheryl, has disappeared. As Harry navigates the foggy setting for his daughter, he also discovers the town's mysterious history, learning about a strange cult that wants to summon its demonic god. Seven years ago, one of its members, Dahlia Gillespie, offered her psychic-empowered daughter, Alessa, as a vessel to birth the god, which involved burning her alive. The ritual failed, however, and split Alessa's spirit into two, forming Harry's adopted daughter Cheryl. The game concludes with Dahlia performing the ritual again, and succeeding in bringing back the god, at the cost of hers and Alessa's lives. Harry kills the demon, and in return receives from Alessa's dying spirit another adopted daughter, Heather, the protagonist of *Silent Hill 3* (2003).

I should preface the comparisons by stating that *SH1* is not perfect, and perpetuates its own troubling implications. *SH1*'s developers intentionally replicate a lot of elements from *Carrie*, and not for the better. The game depicts a young girl who develops psychic powers, which again associates female sexuality and "feminine emotions" to supernatural threat. Like *The Brood*, she produces children through her powers, which emphasizes her gender; it's difficult to re-imagine her character as a boy based on this ability alone. The narrative also conforms to antimaternalist rhetoric that ignores the mother's position, and depicts a typical Bad Mother. Dahlia is ambitious and selfish, using and hurting her daughter for her own needs, as opposed to the "appropriate" motherhood behavior where she sacrifices her needs for her child.

She behaves in an erratic and aggressive or “crazed” manner, and she is responsible for the narrative conflict. What differentiates *SHI* and Dahlia from other “Bad Mother” antagonists is her motivations. She doesn’t conform to fundamentalist Christian or patriarchal values, or seeks to repress her child’s sexuality, and she has no sympathetic qualities to appeal to the game player. She exploits her daughter for selfish purposes, using her as a vessel to birth the cult’s god, thus figuratively using Alessa’s sexuality, even though there is no physical sexual contact.

However, like *Carrie* this game offers potential for feminist argument, depicting an authoritative female antagonist who manages to outwit the male protagonist, not through seduction but through her intellect. The antimaternalist challenge to maternal love, while problematic, also disengages the notion of gender roles that women are natural nurturers or loving and passive. Dahlia is a woman who gave birth to a child, but she shows no sign of maternal love. Furthermore, all four female characters in the game express no natural “nurturing” tendencies, nothing to suggest that they have any inclinations or desires for motherhood. In this game femininity does not equal nurturing.

Instead, *SHI*’s male protagonist is the most nurturing figure in the story, and defies traditional heteronormative masculinity. Like Frank, Harry is identified by his role as a single father. Throughout the game he repeats the phrases “Have you seen a little girl?” and “I’m looking for my daughter” to the side characters. Even as he slowly uncovers the truth about Dahlia, Alessa, and the town, he outright states his concern more for his adopted daughter than for the mystery. “Let Cheryl go, that’s all I ask,” he tells Alessa, implying that he’d be willing to leave without discovering the truth, so long as he had his daughter.

Harry’s characterization is very limited: He is a simple man, kind and brave, determined to protect his daughter. Yet it is very rare to see a depiction of a nurturing single father character.

Not that this resolves the issue of maternal depiction, but this game provides a unique maternal father. While there are films that focus on the father-child bond, such as *Big Daddy* (1999) and *The Sixth Sense* (1999), most of these films portray the father (or father figure) struggling to emotionally connect with the child. In those cases, it's an example of a character arc to develop a Good Father—the difference is, this arc isn't a requirement by hegemonic societal standards.

True, there is emphasis on paternal love and its psychological effects on a child, but we do not dictate fathers to behave a specific way, beyond just showing affection. A Good Father may be good because he behaves childlike himself, and needs to learn a little responsibility, or he may need to learn to spend less time at the office and more time at home. Furthermore, these narratives account in contemporary dramas or comedy, not horror, which reflect social anxieties and concerns. Certainly there exist father antagonists that evoke anxieties about authority and patriarchy; there are also father protagonists, like Frank, that do their best to protect their children. However, prior to 2000s, films featured father protagonists more prominently as the primary character, whose is defined by his parenting role. For films like *The Amityville Horror* (1979) or *The Shining* (1980), the audience did not engage with the father character as fathers, but as individual characters struggling through insanity and resisting or succumbing to malicious influence. We did not care if they were being attentive to their sons, or how they sexually repressed their children, because according to patriarchal standards, men cannot nurture.

Harry does not have to live up to a standard of fatherhood, that is true, but the fact remains that he is defined first (and only) by his parental role. He is heroic for his determination and persistence to save his daughter. He is first and foremost kind and nurturing, accented by his warm appearance dominated by brown coloring. He is kind to the most of the side characters that he meets throughout the game, encouraging them to brave and endure the hellish environment.

When he confronts suspicious characters, he begs them to give back his daughter, versus threatening them. All of this is similar to a traditionally feminine approach to confrontation—that is to say, what the dominant, patriarchal hegemonic society has defined as appropriate and ideally feminine conduct and behavior. Furthermore, he rides the line of active and passive character: While he acts on his agency and looks for his daughter on his own, he is manipulated by Dahlia – again, not through sexual charms, but by Dahlia’s cunning – and unintentionally does everybody’s bidding, much like Rachel in *The Ring*. Yet he is not completely effeminate, so he is not a woman in man’s clothing. He may not show sexual attraction to the female side characters, but neither does he show attraction to the only other male character in the game. He isn’t overly emotional or passive, but he isn’t aggressive or authoritative. He is simply a natural nurturer, a devoted Good Father, which disputes the notion of domestic gender roles.

Admittedly, this is personal interpretation, and various fans of the game will perceive Harry’s characterization in a different light. For instance, director Christophe Gans seems to view the character as possessing too many “feminine” attributes, inspiring him to change the character into Rose da Silva for the film adaptation. This explains why he implements the theme of motherhood into the narrative, affecting multiple and significant changes. On the surface level these changes present the narrative as a feminist film, but in reality adheres to patriarchal maternalist rhetoric, and perpetuates the hegemony further. I cannot state if it was Gans’s intention to make a feminist film, but elements like an all-female cast and included themes of female sexuality, oppressed women, and motherhood give it the superficial appearance of one. It has the potential to purport disruptive feminist values, but fails to meaningfully destabilize patriarchal tradition, because of its troubling elements. Many of these troubles boil down to gender roles that it enforces onto the narrative.

## **“Mother is God”**

In the middle of the film, supporting character, Cybil Bennett, utters the phrase, “Mother is God in the eyes of a child,” which the film repeats at the conclusion. This phrase exemplifies the film adaptation’s new direction and theme affected by the alterations to the original material. All film adaptations must adjust narratives, especially those that originate from different medium, in order to produce an approximate two-hour story accessible to a general audience. However, the *Silent Hill* film makes some significant changes related to the plot, not only changing Harry Mason to a woman, but also changing Dahlia’s role from antagonist to a sympathetic supporting character, and adding a new villain, a fundamentalist Christian strawman responsible for burning Alessa. The film now focuses on celebrating maternal love, which removes the element of nurturing fatherhood that challenged the heteronormative standard of nurturing femininity. These changes do offer promising destabilizing points that repeat hegemonic hauntings in a nuanced fashion, namely by criticizing patriarchal institutions that oppress female sexuality and experience, through the unappealing depiction and the defeat of fundamentalist Christian antagonist. However, this new attention on the mother-child bond perpetuates patriarchal maternalism, the gender essentialist rhetoric of stabilizing society through traditional domesticity. Even if the film’s conclusion attacks a patriarchal structure – which could include pundits that blamed feminism for 9/11 and America’s “emasculatation – it still enforces the notions of nurturing femininity and non-malevolent Good Mothers.

In the film, Rose da Silva takes her adopted daughter, Sharon, to the abandoned town of Silent Hill, because Sharon has been crying out the name during her night terrors. Like the game, their car crashes and Sharon disappears, forcing Rose to search for her in the mysterious town while she confronts monsters like Pyramid Head, a monster with a literal metal pyramid head.

However, the film shows the town teeming with fundamentalist Christian townsfolk lead by Christabella, sister of Dahlia Gillespie. Film-Dahlia is a loving mother manipulated into giving up her daughter Alessa to Christbella, who burns Alessa alive to purify the town from film-Dahlia's "sinful" out of wedlock pregnancy. Alessa, consumed with vengeance, bonds with a demon and takes her revenge on the town, keeping them trapped in a hellish dimension, before they are able to seal her away. Alessa and the demon manipulate Rose into freeing them, so they can brutally murder the town, and allow her and Sharon to return home.

At first thought, the alterations propose the possibility of modern social context redeeming the initial narrative's problematic implications. The primary positive implication is the lack of a Bad Mother; it still compares Rose and Dahlia, but also sympathizes with Dahlia, depicting her as loving, but misguided. She is a victim to the townsfolk that wanted to punish her for having a child out-of-wedlock; the audience recognizes that Dahlia is not a sinner, and that an absent male partner does not impede her maternal capabilities, and, more importantly, her maternal love. The film removes much of Dahlia's authority by placing her on lower planes, usually through her crouching, skittish movements, which places her in a more subservient, victimizing state to the other characters. Dahlia is one of the few Bad Mothers in film that is not abusive or neglectful, but picked the wrong choice and gave her daughter up for death. That is why she has no authority or carries no threat, compared to other mother antagonists I have explored. It is a substantial difference, showing the film's attempt to frame Dahlia and motherhood in a sympathetic tone. It actually portrays maternal impotence, where Dahlia lacks resources and support as a single mother in an oppressive community that coerced her into giving up Alessa for witch burning. We assume that Dahlia did not have the capacity to raise a child by herself in a judgmental town, so she had no choice but to listen to other people.

Of course, the film also hinges the blame on her. The theme on its own might suggest negative connotations about the mother-child's relationship, suggesting that the mother has absolute authority over the child. It empowers the mother, but it also places great responsibility on her shoulders and continues to evaluate her according to the standards of Good Motherhood. At the conclusion, when Rose utters this line to Dahlia upon leaving the town, the camera focuses primarily on Dahlia, baffled and traumatized from the previous events. Rose's tone off screen is bland, no hint of warmth or anger; no judgment, but also no pity. Then the camera switches to Sharon and her ambiguous expression: The tilted angle gives her authority over Dahlia crouched at her feet, and judgment. A fellow mother does not judge, but children are allowed to. Neither Rose nor Alessa forgive or hate Dahlia, but they blame her for the demon, for the town's hellish state, for the massacre, for giving up her daughter. The message carries a warning, and Alessa sparing Dahlia's life may be the greater punishment, because Dahlia must continue to live with the burden of guilt, knowing that the massacre and Otherworld, and Alessa's hate-filled soul, exists because of her action.

Yet while the film complicates the Bad Mother, it provides an extreme example of a Good Mother through the protagonist, Rose. "Mother is God" also applies to Rose as she casts judgment upon the townsfolk prior to the bloody climax. Her clothes noticeably change color from blue to red, which carry maternal significance. The pale blue colors, bordering on white, are innocent maternalism, equivalent to depictions of the Virgin Mary with a blue shawl. For most of the film, Rose is an isolated, innocent mother searching for her daughter. However, when she allows the demon to enter her body – specifically through her abdomen or womb – her clothes are now bloody red. Depictions of the Virgin Mary also color her dress red for the symbolism of menstrual blood, but in Rose's case, the blood means sacrificial (object) blood:



She is willing to kill people for her daughter. It empowers her at the climax, where she calls out the townsfolk for trying to murder Alessa, and releases the demon from within her. This associates the demon with femininity, perhaps because both values oppose fundamental patriarchal Christian values. It's one of the few moments of the film that Rose holds any power.

The film does well in framing Rose's maternal love for Sharon. In the game, we see no interaction between Harry and Cheryl, but the film shows Rose and Sharon bonding. For example, in the beginning, Rose tells Sharon that they'll go to Silent Hill in order to help with Sharon's night terrors. It's a very kind and heartwarming scene—if also a little saccharine, with mother and daughter sitting under a tree, surrounded by lush green grass, talking about a picture Sharon drew and making cat noises at each other. However, there is still an underlying maternal subtext due to their environment: They're among Mother Nature, sitting on the earth and under a tree, all life-giving scenery. Even if this scene could apply to a father and son's conversation, it might have occurred in a more “masculine” environment with more man-made structures, or included “masculine” attributes like hunting and survival. Gans places his female characters in a feminine environment.

And that is the problem with Rose and the rest of the film: It consists primarily of stereotypical gender essentialism, not just through parenting, but through the characters themselves. Gans might have complicated the portrayal of the Bad Mother by making Dahlia a more sympathetic character, but he depicts Rose as the ultimate mother figure, who already devotes her entire attention to her daughter from the beginning and undergoes very little development. Unlike *The Ring*, Rose does not need to improve on her mothering. She – seemingly jobless – already spends a copious amount of time with her daughter prior to their separation. She wants to help her daughter overcome her night terrors, by any means necessary.

When Sharon sleepwalks, Rose reaches her first and comforts her, and then later decides to take her to the place she talks about, rather than seeking professional help. She pays attention to Sharon's drawings, unlike Rachel from *The Ring*, showing concern when the cheerful drawings become dark and twisted. She never raises her voice or disciplines Sharon, and always satisfies Sharon's needs affectionately. One of the supporting characters, a cop named Cybil, tells Rose, "Mother is God in the eyes of a child" – the first instance that phrase is ever spoken – in a very kind way, reiterating that Rose is a Good Mother, loving and protective like the Protestant imagery of a loving, forgiving God. The word rose conjures up "pure femininity," and there is a flower called Rose of Sharon, which further defines Rose by her relation to Sharon, and not as a separate individual.

This portrayal is as debilitating as Rachel's "need to improve," because Rose has no real characterization or agency for herself. She is just a Good Mother, nothing more. And the same could be said about the original character, Harry Mason, but this is something that oftentimes applies to mothers more so than fathers. Rose is a rare Good Mother because these don't physically exist in most fiction. They exist through dead mothers, ones who gave their lives to defend their children either through childbirth or external threats. It's easy to deify a dead mother into the perfect Good Mother, when we don't have to think about discipline or maternal impotence. Rose, however, is a living Good Mother, and shows the limitations of this character, when all her motivation and agency depends on her child. It's a reductive role, similar to how romantic plots reduce female characters' motivations to finding a man—yet mainstream culture does not criticize the Good Mother trope as much, because we don't consider the mother as a subject, whose experience is worth relating to. Rose does not undergo any arc, because she does not need to: She is a flat character, a perfect Good Mother who does not need to change at all.

Rose's portrayal diminishes the significant complexity of Dahlia's treatment, because the narrative says that Dahlia could easily be like Rose, who always puts her daughter first.

This thinking contributes to gender essentialism, to the concerns that Faludi and Skinnon raise about feminism under attack, and forcing women into reproductive service. Even if *Silent Hill* does not represent the damsel-in-distress and masculine frontier hero, it preserves the ideas that woman as nurturer and healer, and that she must sacrifice her interests for the sake of others. It is the same unquestioned beliefs that Chodorow critiqued in 1978, and persists in today's mold for mainstream audiences, even as Third Wave feminism attempts to re-define "woman" and the feminine experience as inclusive to any individual regardless of sex, sexuality, and gender. The Good Mother trope allows gender essentialism to maintain influence in the domestic or hegemonic sphere, in order to assert a sense of cultural stability, and allow gender roles to haunt our society in stagnant, negligent ways.

Gan's quote speaks volumes of heteronormative mindset affecting mainstream narrative: He explicitly states that they considered Harry Mason to "act like a woman" and thus was a challenge to write for, because they could not conceive of writing a male character as nurturing or maternal. They had to write a female character to preserve the traits of a non-action horror protagonist. This is a troubling thought, especially when we consider how they executed this portrayal through Rose.

To begin with, Rose is more of a victim than an active protagonist. Whereas Harry meant to eschew gender norms as an action-capable hero, he still defended himself against the monsters. Rose is rendered helpless throughout the movie. She never picks up a weapon; when she tries, she loses it five seconds later. When monsters first assault her in the beginning, she runs into a building filled with chairs and objects that she could grab and throw at the monsters,

but she doesn't, and instead flails about screaming. She gets handcuffed by Cybil in the first third of the film, and stays that way for ten to fifteen minutes as she runs around town. She does display deduction skills by finding notes that tell her to go to the school, which she finds by following bus route maps—but anybody would do the same thing. Also, while the video game had monsters running on the streets, Rose does not meet any, which removes the tension. It is one thing to portray a character as realistically scared and helpless, that creates tension and fear. It is another thing for the film to continuously put her in extremely vulnerable positions, such as handcuffed and lost, and pursued by masculine figures, with no means to defend herself. In a sense, Rose does undergo some development at the very end, when she confronts the townsfolk and releases the vengeance. But it is hard to take her sudden authority seriously, when for a majority of the film she showed no independent thought, and had to depend on others for safety or for information about her daughter. Unlike *Rosemary's Baby*, there is very little reason for the film to depict Rose as a passive, helpless victim.

The cinematography's framing enforces this vulnerability. In *SHI* the camera angle is "over-the-shoulder" in order to close the distance between player and Harry, as well as limit the visual scope and enhance the apprehension of entering possibly dangerous situations. It highlights Harry's isolation, but his subject-hood and agency is more complex because of the player-character bond. Harry is a simple character himself, but he feels complex because the player is Harry, and so we impose our own personality onto him. His agency is our agency, under our control, so Harry is as active as we make him to be.

Horror films, on the other hand, rely on spectatorship and close psychic distance, but *Silent Hill* does not necessarily engage with the audience. The camera also isolates Rose through wide-shots, but because the engagement exists on another level, she loses her power and agency.

Even for audiences who know nothing about the game, it is frustrating to observe a protagonist who does make any attempt to defend herself. We are afraid for her life and want her to survive the encounters with the monsters, but she is presented as more of a victim than Harry is. If we recall Gans' interpretation of Harry, then this implies that he thinks women are passive victims, and justifies why he chooses to keep the spectator at a distance from the character, to watch her suffer as opposed to suffering alongside of her.

The film consists of a female cast, focusing on Rose, Sharon, Cybil, Dahlia, and Christabella, but Rose's husband, Christopher and a police officer, Gucci, share approximately thirty percent of the screen time, and reasserts masculine tropes. There is no game-equivalent to Christopher, as Harry's wife died years ago, so they had to create a plot for him, where he looks for his wife and daughter. It is not completely useless, as his investigation provides information to audience members that never played the game, such as discovering that the town exists in an alternate dimension invisible to regular people. Of course, one could argue that there are other ways for the audience to discover this information. Furthermore, one must question his attention to his daughter. Christopher and Sharon have no scenes together, which then implies that not only do men lack a maternal instinct, they lack a parental instinct entirely. Much of Christopher's motivation seems to hinge on finding his wife more than his daughter. He constantly says her name when he feels her presence nearby, and calls out for her more than he calls out for Sharon when he tries to look through the abandoned buildings.

Christopher also serves the purpose of emphasizing the gender divisions. In the beginning Christopher talks about putting Sharon in a mental institution to help her night terrors, his tone lacking warmth. This associates Christopher and masculinity with "professional help," which Second Wave feminists criticized as patriarchal environments that infringed on women's bodies.

It also contrasts Rose's decision, spoken in concerned tones, of taking Sharon to Silent Hill to heal her terrors through memory. Whereas Christopher wants to rely on medicine, Rose decides on emotional healing by taking her "home", again associating femininity with domesticity. Of course, Christopher is still more thoughtful than Rose is; he begins his investigation during the day, and does research into the town before looking for them. Rose, on the other hand, leaves at night and knows little to nothing about the town prior to entering it, thereby connecting femininity and motherhood with irrational emotions, and masculinity with cold logic.

These connotations continue further as Christopher investigates the mysteries and meets with the male cop Gucci. Both are oblivious to the supernatural dimension, relying on rationale and "reality" to find Rose, and failing because of this adherence to masculine sensibilities. Similarly, the male townsfolk must wear protective mining gear whenever they leave the Church, whereas the women can walk around without any gear, suggesting that the women are immune, or that can intuit the supernatural. Women "know" better because of "inherent female cognition," typically tied to "female emotions," which derives from "female" or "maternal hormones."

His interaction with Gucci versus Rose's interaction with Cybil is also gender-based. At first, he and Gucci are friendly in a "masculine" sense, where Gucci suggests (and sympathizes) that Rose left Christopher, but offers to help him look, even though he knows the town is abandoned. However, as Christopher persists, Gucci becomes less compliant and friendly, and even arrests and dismisses him from the county, calling him "city-boy" in a derisive tone, trying to emasculate him. While the movie doesn't agree with Gucci's opinion that Christopher is emasculate, it shows that men care about masculinity, and does not challenge this implication.

In contrast, Cybil and Rose first start off on opposing sides, with Cybil suspecting Rose of abusing Sharon, and trying to arrest her after finding her in Silent Hill, oblivious to the town.

However, after Cybil sees the monsters, she trusts and helps Rose, even sacrificing herself to distract the townsfolk. Cybil, while not maternal, has a backstory where she saved a child, which further links femininity with nurturing. The men start off as friendly equals, but then become enemies, whereas the women learn to treat each other as equals, and nurturers, just before Cybil dies. While this helps to focus on positive female relationships, the film also reasserts the notion that “real men” don’t care about other people, while women put other people’s interests before theirs. This is very troubling to think about, especially when *SHI* actually painted Harry and Cybil as equals. Their gender didn’t matter but they cared about each other as two survivors in this mysterious town. The film however keeps differentiating gender, and reiterates Skinnon’s argument that women redeem themselves and people through service and sacrifice. *Silent Hill* was released five years after 9/11, and this lingering desire for traditional stability influences this portrayal, showing Cybil sacrificing herself to monsters – distorted, faceless nonhumans that could be read as extreme representation of the Other, garnering no spectator sympathy – and cult members to protect Rose, ie., “preserve the family unit.” She takes on a masculine role of protecting the weak, which may be why she dies, because women cannot do a “man’s job.”

Gans uses other elements to underscore Rose’s femininity, namely as victim by including the monster Pyramid Head. Pyramid Head originates from in the second title of the franchise, but he is a popular figure, and has existed in other titles like *Silent Hill: Homecoming*; most likely his popularity explains his inclusion in this narrative. In the film, Pyramid Head is a hypermasculine monster, usually followed by swarms of bugs, and meant to be as a protector or executor of Alessa’s will. He appears in the middle, starting from the Otherworld version of school where he hunts Rose down, and disappearing after the initial meeting with the townsfolk at the church, where he flays alive a woman who had been bullying Dahlia in a previous scene.

In both narratives, he has scenes of sexual assault. The game explicitly depicts him as raping monsters, while in the film he traps Rose and Cybil in an elevator, and thrusts his long sword through the doors to try and get at them. The film's action is more disturbing because it is against actual human women as opposed to monsters; and it foreshadows the film's gruesome climax.

At the film's climax, Alessa and the demon confront and kill the townsfolk. Christabella, the film's antagonist and Dahlia's sister, faces her comeuppance for what she did to Alessa for judging other women for sexual or deviant behavior. She's very similar to Carrie's mother, far more than *SH1*'s Dahlia, as she behaves like a traditional Bad Mother that represses her "children" (in this case, her followers)—which further paints women in authoritative positions as deadly and toxic. At the end, Alessa gets her vengeance on Christabella in the most disturbing way possible: She manipulates barbed wire to enter Christabella's vagina, and split her open. It is gory rape, pure and simple. This action occurs for more than two minutes, switching between Christabella's suffering face and the barbed wire sneaking up through her dress. This is Alessa's crowning moment of vengeance upon the woman who tortured her before, by performing even worst, sexually-based torture. The film criticizes fundamentalist, repressive patriarchy through one female character enacting intense sexual violence onto another. Granted, this scene provides a unique tension of one woman showing her authority over another, specifically a victimized child overpowering a religious leader—but there were other ways to demonstrate this tensions. The game did not need to rape its Dahlia character in order to punish her for making her daughter a vessel for a demonic god, but the film felt differently. Whether or not Gans intended for this film to contain feminist subtext does not matter—what matters is this conclusion, finding satisfaction in the unnecessary and gory rape. It is hypocritical to empower one female character by brutal sexual objectification of another.



I want to clarify that I do not think all horror film should ignore violence against women. The genre relies on death, and women should not be an exception to that. Furthermore, not only do some films capitalize on exploitative material, but some of these narratives can even promote in-depth discussion about feminine experience that faces sexual violence, like *Rosemary's Baby*. Not all, obviously, and some exploit sexual violence for the sake of sensationalism. That is a fact of life. However, I am critical about this scene in particular because of two reasons. One, it is a deliberate addition to the narrative. The *SH* franchise includes implications of exploitation against women, but these are usually implicit suggestions. Nor do any of the games portray sex as a weapon or tool to punish a character, especially not female characters. If anything, the video games sympathized with women in regards to their sexuality. This adaptation, however, punishes Christabella for her repression by violently raping her, which presents a hypocritical punishment.

This leads into the second criticism: The mother protagonist maternal horror narrative has the potential for portraying female experience, and thus broadening marginalized representation and voice in cinema. It doesn't have to be, but it has that promise, which is why I focus on these stories. As we have seen with other films, it is possible to include patriarchal traditions in these narratives, but the mother protagonist maternal horror narrative still contain some challenging feminist content. This movie does, too, but it is like *Carrie*, wherein it punishes one woman to validate or empower another woman. Now, it is possible to interpret this power struggle as occurring between two characters, regardless of gender, but as the film's execution derives from gender biases and personal authority, it is difficult to remove this implication. Alessa is not only getting her revenge, she is humiliating and sexually assaulting another woman, which invalidates Christabella's threat and experience. It may be true that Christabella deserves a comeuppance, but the scene suggests rape-justification; it is a step away from thinking, "She deserved it."

Yet despite these problems, I do think there is a significant, even redeeming quality to this conclusion. It criticizes the societal pressure that women face, of women as chaste individuals upholding communal or national morality. This harkens back to the 9/11 patriarchal pundits that derided feminists – as women who do not seek men’s approval or pleasure – for emasculating the nation, and for destroying hegemonic traditions and threatening unity. Similarly, the cult named Alessa as a sin, something that needed to be destroyed in order to purify the town. They blame her and Dahlia for the hellish fate, even though Rose, acting as the voice of reason, tells them that they brought their nightmare upon themselves. Alessa and Dahlia suffered because a repressed community enforced moral pressure upon these women, just as feminists suffer culpability for national dilemmas from patriarchal extremists.

The final scene twists the notion of redemption through maternal love. Rose and Sharon drive home, happy to leave the experience behind them—but the fog from town follows them. When they arrive home, Christopher doesn’t see them at all. They’re trapped in the alternate, foggy dimension, while he is in the colorful, golden real world; although he seems to recognize their presence, and calls out Rose’s name. The postmodern horror trait plays a large role in this ending scene, because even though the true antagonists – the fundamentalist townsfolk – have truly died and Alessa has gotten her vengeance, the protagonists Rose and Sharon have not triumphed. They cannot return to the real world, and Rose’s efforts were futile. This is different from the video game as well, because Harry Mason escaped with a new daughter, and started a new life that continued in *SH3*. The film series also continues with Michael J. Basset’s *Silent Hill: Revelations 3D* (2012) to mirror *SH3*, but Rose does not appear in the film, suggesting that she is still trapped in the Otherworld. It is difficult to understand why she remains in the Otherworld, but it suggests that maternal love was not enough to absolve the conflict.

There are two different conclusions to draw from Rose's stay in the Otherworld. One is that Rose did not express pure maternal love. She enables Alessa's wrath, bringing the demon into the Church and unleashing it. Therefore, she is a "sinner" because she helped Alessa and the demon. Maternal love isn't completely innocent. *Psycho* and *Carrie* portray the consequences of oppressive and abusive Bad Mother affection. *Silent Hill* instead implies that a Good Mother's maternal love – even for a child that isn't hers – can encourage negative, destructive behavior. She contributes to the townsfolk's deaths, and thus has as much blood on her hands as Alessa and Dahlia do. A second conclusion is that maternal love is still weak against greater forces of hate and terror. Rose rescues her daughter and brings her home, but it did not stop Alessa, the demon, or the Otherworld. Maternal love then is significant on a smaller, personal scale, and can inspire great movements, but it cannot absolve the past or redeem the present problems. This extends the response to the expectations placed upon mothers, especially in regards to stabilization: Maternal love can heal, but it also cannot fix everything. The family suffers the consequences of terrible affairs, and so society cannot depend on this unit as a point of stability. Both readings redeem the movie's message a little, because it rejects the idea that Good Mothers can save the world. Good Mothers can cause these problems, or they cannot help at a large scale.

These are elements worth recognizing and redeeming from the film: Society demands so much from women. Yet if we recognize the true cause of the problems that haunt us, we can choose different resolutions. Rather than dismissing women's grievances or blaming women for corrupting the nation, we can and should recognize that hegemonic pressures placed upon masculinity and femininity, particularly for destructive events, only cause more anxieties and show the fallacies of hypocritical, repressed values. Rather than relying on and forcing mothers to repeat past traditions, American society could rely and express new types of family structures.

New households overseen by single fathers or single mothers, non-heterosexual couples, adopted parents, etc. can redefine comfort and safety, which could evoke a new national sense of security that unifies its individuals, versus dividing them besides of gender essentialism.

## **Conclusion**

On the surface level, the film reads as a progressive, challenging feminist film: It has an independent, active female protagonist and an all-female cast; it has a message that imbues motherhood with god-like authority; and it condemns fundamentalist patriarchal religious values. It consists of elements that could qualify this film as feminist text, or one that appears to address the female experience and oppression that women face, not just from men, but from other women as well. It has the potential to dispute the heteronormative tradition, more so than the game's original narrative, through its alteration of the protagonist's gender, and consideration of the maternal experience.

Yet the filmmaker's remarks reveal the gender essentialist values still pervading mainstream culture, and influencing rhetoric to continue the same trajectory. Instead of asking why women, not men, mother, American society, of varying beliefs and backgrounds, still rely on the notion of motherhood as related to the domestic, related to stability. There is security in the notion of mothers. During times of great anxiety such as the 2000s, we seek the comfort of the ideal mother to keep society grounded, that American culture can still continue as long as we rely on the mother-child bond. Our media reflects this, where we go so far as to alter a character's gender to suit more conventional gender tropes, especially related to nurturing, or we force an adult female character to take up the mothering role, like in *Mama*.

### Chapter Three: “Doomed to Repeat”

In the last chapter I focused on the stability of gender roles of male protector and female victim/nurturer as a response to 9/11. This chapter will continue examining 9/11’s influence on American society by focusing on the revival of the Other – specifically as it refers to the titular character Mama and child character Lilly – threat through the guise of Bad Mother influence, and the desire to abject external threat in order to re-stabilize society. After explaining the notion of the Other and Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, and addressing their potential for disruptive hauntological resolutions, I will closely read the film, *Mama* (2013), and discuss its themes of abjection and its enforcement of female nurturer role, in order to argue that lingering anxieties from the 2000s have revived the external threat, this time reflection the Other’s infiltration into the domestic sphere, and disrupting the confines.

*Mama*’s promising destabilization points that could generate new resolutions to the gender essentialists haunting our culture and media. The film attempts to negotiate between counterculture attitudes – having two non-conformist individuals as the parents – and stabilizing domestic traditions of a heterosexual two-parent household. This enforces the hegemonic standard of having a domestic mother and “career-oriented” father, but it also hints at a desire to alter the heteronormative standard of the “perfect” family, and could initiate conversation for broadening representation of alternative families. While the film enforces gender roles, it consists of other elements can complicate interpretations of the material and repeated traditions.

Thereby, we repeat domesticity as a stabilizing point, but modify the types of families to suggest that American culture finds stability in new experiences, versus the hegemony.

### **Abjecting the Other**

In the introduction, I briefly mentioned the notion of the Other, but I did not go into great detail about it. This is because the Other did not factor into my discussion of the mother protagonist maternal horror narrative, until this chapter. Most of the films that I have analyzed fall into the postmodern category, and so consist of internal threats—internal referring to spatial, or a literal domestic environment, individual, or national boundaries. The Other is typically identified as experiences or traits that oppose the mainstream standards, or the Norm, which distinguishes ethnic from White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, poor from middle- and upper-class, and female from male. These divisions often label the non-hegemonic traits as negative and undesirable, which has contributed to the prejudices and marginalization of many social groups. The Other is a significant and common tool used in fiction, especially classic horror, often associated with antagonistic conflict that challenge the heteronormative hero(ine)’s values.

We rely on the Other to develop an identity based on evaluative morals, coding certain behavior as appropriate and desirable, and opposing behavior as destructive and repulsive. This evaluative assessment derives from repression, which film scholar Robin Wood (1986) addresses in regards to American culture. Wood clarifies that the act of repression is not an inherently negative or oppressive quality. He defines it as basic repression of self-interest and indulgences, repressing violent and self-centered sexual needs; this basic repression helps humans function on a social level, to interact with other people and establish broad communities. “*Basic* repression makes us distinctively human, capable of directing our own lives and co-existing with others ... *surplus* repression makes us into monogamous heterosexual bourgeois patriarchal capitalists.”

Surplus repression of sexuality and other self-identifying attributes projects an evaluative standard, forcing citizens to conscribe to a restricted set of “ideal” behavior set by dominant hegemonic culture, perpetuated by repeated traditions. This allows the Norm, the standard behavior, to subvert the power and agency of “minor” – depending on location – groups based on race, gender, sexuality, status, etc. In regards to gender, masculinity and male-ness becomes the Norm, the standard behavior, and so causes “the attribution to the female of passivity, and her preparation for her subordinate, dependent role in our culture” (Wood 64-6). This coincides with the repetition of a national gender essentialist narrative of the protective man and the victimized woman, and explains why patriarchal pundits would criticize feminists for disrupting the national order during the 2000s.

Wood wrote his criticisms against repression and patriarchal standardization in the 1980s, in regards to 1970s horror films. His point still applies to a majority of mainstream American values and identity, and contemporary media, as a consequence of 9/11 that evoked desire for stabilization in its aftermath. However, films like *Silent Hill*, and *Mama* as I will discuss in this chapter, suggest subtle changes to these values. While filmmakers may still ascribe to the notion of female nurturing, they also reject the idea that women – and other marginalized groups – should be repressed for the sake of stability the American narrative. As we will see, *Mama* rejects the idea that an idealized family still exists, but projects the possibility of non-hegemonic (the Other) domesticity as the hope of stabilization.

I stated earlier that typically classic horror utilizes the Other in its narrative. Postmodern horror may not use the Other as commonly, and most postmodern films rely on internal threats. However, postmodern horror generates the possibility of more complicated interpretations of and (hegemonic) spectator engagement with the Other character, and the perceived heteronormative.

Wood suggests that the Other may represent “simply as something external to the culture or to the self, but also what is repressed (though never destroyed) in the self and projected outward in order to be hated and disowned,” meaning that the Other’s attributes may derive from our own repressed, undesirable attributes that we impose or project onto other people (Wood 66). I want to extend this point, and suggest that this offers potential for a hauntological solution – repeating a tradition in a new direction – that horror films can, and often attempt to, generate for resolutions. Horror films can evoke connection to, or reinvent the Other for internal horror.

Spectator connection to the Other has existed since, and has been established because of classic horror cinema, but the level of engagement has evolved with the postmodern context. We will assume that a majority of horror audiences identify with the mainstream or hegemonic standards of middle-class, White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, masculine-based heteronormative conventions. Based on this assumption, audiences, both classic and postmodern, may sympathize with the Other, but they also fear the Other as an antagonist that threatens the hegemonic protagonist and supporting cast’s lives. Audiences may be charmed by Dracula’s seductive powers or pity the alienated, childlike Frankenstein’s Monster, but they also identify them as monsters that need to be destroyed in order to re-stabilize hegemonic traditions.

It is not only hegemonic spectators who maintain a connection with the Other; there are other relationships. Marginalized voices, specifically members of the LGBTQIAP community, can and often do identify with Other antagonists despite the negative connotations. As Henry M. Benshoff explains, “Because of their already disenfranchised location outside of the dominant culture, or their practice of leading ‘double’ lives, many homosexual spectators of the genre would perhaps be more likely than heterosexual ones to identify with the figure of the monster or villain.” However, there is also another reason for engaging with the Other antagonist:



“Identification with the monster can mean many different things to many different people, and is not necessarily always a negative thing for the individual spectators in question” (Benshoff 13, 37). Identifying with the antagonist is not necessarily negative, because it is possible to appropriate an antagonist for a symbol of empowerment or representation. If heteronormative spectators can sympathize with a monstrous Other, then they can also sympathize with marginalized experiences.

On the one hand, the Other’s threatening qualities provide a sense of power and notoriety, as well as sharing relatable experiences of hiding from a heteronormative mob that oppresses and despises them for their “unnatural” nature. On the other hand, postmodern culture clouds the boundaries of morals, of good and evil, which allows marginalized spectators to not only identify with the Other, but reclaim and appropriate the antagonist into their camp symbols that empowers them, as oppose to evoking repulsion from the heteronormative audience. This coincides with the relocation of threat from external to internal. As the anxiety turns inward, into fears of the hegemonic norm’s destructive capabilities and values – which are reproduced through the domestic structure, i.e., maternal influence – the Other’s threat is alleviated from the hegemonic structure, and can even appeal to mainstream audiences because of the camp marketing (Benshoff 173-229).

While Benshoff refers specifically to queer identification, this applies to race and gender associations. For example, women can identify with the witch, a famous, primarily female villain or archetype that sacrifices living things – stereotypically babies – for malevolent purposes. Women are already classified as the Other to masculinity, but the witch can wield supernatural power over men, thus giving women a sense of agency and independence. The witch has severe negative connotations in a Judeo-Christian culture as a follower of Satan and empowered female.

However, Second Wave feminist have identified with the witch through paganism and other earth-based religions that emphasize femininity and motherhood.

The witch is one example of a monstrous feminine, a term from Barbara Creed's text, *The Monstrous Feminine* (1993): "The term female monster implies a simple reversal of 'male monster'. The reasons why the monstrous-feminine horrifies her audience are quite different from the reasons why the male monster horrifies his...she is defined in terms of her sexuality." Sexuality does not necessarily mean that all monstrous feminine use sex as a women, like the classic femme fatale trope. A monstrous feminine's sexuality can vary from using sex as a weapon, to maintaining her own agency over her sexual expression, to her sexuality infringing on masculine sexuality, evoking the typical fears of castration. Sexuality can also mean that the monstrous-feminine repeats gender essentialist feminine traits, but in a threatening aspect, which evoke figures like Grendel's mother seeking revenge for her dead son, which expresses the feminine nurturing trait (Creed 3).

The reason Creed focuses on this term and its significance is because "most writers adopt Freud's argument...that woman, *by nature*, is a victim," which she argues helps contribute the tradition of active male and passive female spectator. The monstrous-feminine is another expression of the Other that helps empowers a marginalized voice, specifically for women. While the monstrous feminine may project negative connotations, she also exhibits threatening traits that typically infringes on masculine authority—although she can also threaten "appropriate" hegemonic femininity by attacking the passive heroine. Society codes the monstrous feminine as negative mostly for her threat to the gender essentialist structure, and yet that is an empowering potential for women. Even if the monstrous feminine dies, she does so after usurping tradition and threatening the balance (Creed 7).

It is difficult to frame the Bad Mother, a monstrous feminine archetype, as strictly the Other, or as a strictly internal or external threat. If one considers the mother's femininity, she should account as an Other antagonist because she represses her son's masculine development, or she displays independence from male sexual influence. Yet the mother is also identified by her domestic responsibility, as a member of the hegemony who instills patriarchal practices and values into her children, and oversees their development as stable, healthy, compliant citizens. The interpretation can vary for each film, but I often classify Bad Mothers as internal threats, and not necessarily as an Other antagonist. Even in cases like *Psycho* where the mother's oppressive femininity threatens an individual's masculinity, it is possible to interpret the Bad Mother as embodying anxieties of internal cultural emasculation, as opposed to an outside force or conflict infiltrating and disrupting the natural order (although that is a possible reading). Countercultural individuals in general classify the mother as an internal threat, representing the problems with the hegemonic structure, which coincides with postmodern horror film's proliferated portrayal of Bad Mother antagonist.

Postmodern horror relocates horror from external to internal, where the threats changed from monsters of foreign or outlandish origins terrorizing the populace, to specters or murderers lurking in suburbia or the home. This relocation typically means that the Other does not appear as the primary antagonist or conflict, because the anxieties concern the internal structure, best embodied by the American family, whether they are threatened, or they are the threat. However, postmodern horror can reinvent the Other to reflect the self, the heteronormative family, and the hegemonic American identity as our own threats, that our repressed, hegemonic structure causes the primary social issues of gender expectations, generalized public paranoia and apathy, and a desire for restricted, standardized stabilization in accordance to heteronormative values.

It is possible to interpret the Bad Mother antagonist as this reflected Other, representing internal hegemonic threat that we project onto marginalized people, because of the mother's strong association and expectation to regenerate American domestic tradition. The Bad Mother, the oppressive matriarch imposing her negative influence on the child characters, can demonstrate the fallacies of surplus repression, as in the case of *Psycho*, *Carrie*, and *Silent Hill*. However, the problem with this interpretation is that the movie often blames the individual mother, blaming women and femininity, for these social problems, as opposed to the institutional structure, national narrative, and cultural impositions. *The Brood* and *Rosemary's Baby* avert these problems, but they hold less influence in American culture when certain context stirs up extremist, antimaternalist rhetoric. Feminists and countercultural antimaternalists commonly view mothers as contributing to the patriarchal institutions by complying with the monogamous domestic unit that usually repeats repressive traditions. In contrast, events like 9/11 stir up patriarchal antimaternalist sentiment, viewing mothers as part of the feminist structure that supposedly emasculates the nations and leaves its defenses open to attacks. In either case, motherhood is blamed, because it is classified as a key component of femininity, which heteronormative, masculine-based standards identify as different, and therefore unclean.

This then classifies maternal influence as an abject, as primal, uncivilized attributes infringing upon a child's development of selfhood and opposing the paternal institutional law. A child cannot become a "civilized" individual if the maternal influence persists (Kristeva 70-1). This is where the portrayal of the oppressive, domineering, self-centered Bad Mother antagonist originates from. This character not only opposes the tenants of maternal love, but she also hinders the child's development. The patriarchal antimaternalist rhetoric and anxieties derive from this concern of an overbearing mother who may repress the son's masculine development.

In the case of feminist antimaternalists, maternal influence also may cause concern for the mother instilling undesirable traits into her daughter—in this case, the undesirable traits are traditional feminine passivity and domesticity, and causes the women to comply to patriarchal law. Therefore, abjection does not necessarily need to apply solely to patriarchal rhetoric, which is one way of repeating an ideology in a new trajectory.

But this reiteration is still problematic, as it foremost blames the mother, as opposed to the institutional structure. Creed – who extends Kristeva’s abjection methodology to horror and focuses on the child’s position – suggests that this relationship and conflict plays out typically in the (maternal) horror formula, where the child attempts to abject the maternal influence to establish a separate sense of self, but the mother refuses to let the child do this. Thus, “[p]artly consumed by the desire to remain locked in a blissful relationship with the mother and partly terrified of separation, the child finds it easy to succumb to the comforting pleasure of the dyadic relationship,” and so the child does not develop a different sense of self (Creed 11-12). The movies that I have discussed often reflect the negative consequences of children that do not abject the maternal influence, depicting offspring that develop into malevolent, aggressive individuals that attack and kill other people, which does not comply with institutional law.

It should be emphasized that abjection itself is not inherently negative. While I use Creed’s trajectory of abjection, Kristeva’s original methods have more complexity to them. She speaks on abjection’s potential for disrupting the hegemonic structure. Abjection forces contact with the “unclean” material, which help us to define ourselves and draw up boundaries. Yet constant contact can generate different interactions, similar to how constant engagement with threatening material can produce new responses, or how spectators of varying backgrounds and marginalized identities can appropriate characters and conflicts for different types of purposes.

American society responds to war different based on context and circumstances, so the cultural reception to World War I differs from World War II, as does the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the War on Terror. Similarly, abjection confronts the unclean and boundaries, which can eventually force people to ask about these boundaries, ask about the abject material and even encourage new engagement. This chapter's film, *Mama*, also confronts the abject. It engages with abjection in a "straight" manner – which Creed focuses on – showing the child characters need to abject a negative maternal influence in order to attain a hegemonic-based sense of selfhood, but it still confronts these questions of boundaries and "filth," and whether they are as repulsive as we typically identify them as.

The movie generates the quote, "A ghost is an emotion bent out of shape, condemned to repeat itself time and time again, until it rights the wrong that was done." That is the full quote, and yet the IMDb, as well as various movie websites, forgets the second half: "Right the wrong that was done." It is a fitting and appropriate quote for this thesis, because I ask about haunting and repetitions, and resolutions to these hauntings. People recognize that repetitions exist, but they may not realize that repetitions can change direction, and seek new resolutions. Movies like *Mama* repeat the problematic hegemonic traditions, but it also offers different repetitions that could help right the wrongs of the Bad Mother, the Other and external threat, and the ideal American family, which is potential that I will point out as new solutions to consider.

### **"Victoria Stay"**

Andres Muschietti's *Mama* is another problematic, yet promising film for discussing gender essentialism haunting American domesticity for the sake of stability. The movie adheres to the formula of the mother protagonist maternal horror narrative: It provides a Good Mother protagonist and a Bad Mother antagonist, who respectively stabilize and disrupt the home space.

The Good Mother protagonist, Annabel, improves her expression of maternal love where she learns to love and protect the child characters, despite her initial rejection of nurturing behavior; and the Bad Mother antagonist, Mama, negatively influences the behavioral development of the child characters. It situates the Bad Mother as an infiltrating external threat, evoking the idea of terrorism and repeating the fears of the Other, and actively projecting the idea of abjection, where the child characters are encouraged to reject the Bad Mother's influence. The film also imposes the notion of motherhood and maternal love onto an adult female character, thereby forcing a nurturing role on a woman because of her gender.

Yet the film also engenders classic spectator sympathy for the Bad Mother antagonist, offering a monstrous feminine antagonist that is both terrifying and relatable. This sympathetic portrayal of the antagonist, Mama, as well as the mother protagonist, Annabel, depicts maternal impotence, removing the typical evaluative standards placed upon motherhood in other films. The movie also portrays an "atypical" family that consists of counterculture parents and developmentally-stunted "feral" children, which repeats the heterosexual two-parent household structure, but deviates from the ideal tradition of stable, hegemonic-conformist parents and precocious, well-behaved children. This film perpetuates the notion of children need to abject the maternal influence, which impedes "appropriate" and "civilized" behavior, yet it uses another mother character to help the children abject, which can complicate the reading. Overall *Mama* offers complex conclusions in regards to enforcing or challenging heteronormative domestic traditions, but it shows the promise of revising haunting, and suggests future destabilizations.

Like *Silent Hill*, *Mama* portrays an adopted versus biological parent-child relationship, although that's where the similarities end. The film begins when a bankrupt man takes his daughters to an abandoned cabin in the woods, prepared to kill them out of desperation.

However, a mysterious shadow kills him instead, and raises the girls, Victoria and Lilly, who call her Mama. After five years under her care, they are found by men hired by their uncle – their father’s twin brother, Lucas – and brought to a child welfare center, struggling to adjust to civilization because of their feral upbringing. Because Lucas and his girlfriend, Annabel, do not conform to traditional parental roles – as an illustrator and punk-rock guitarist respectively – they are forced to work with Dr. Dreyfuss, the psychiatrist in charge of the girls, who puts them all in a house where he can monitor the girls’ developments. Mama follows them to the house—the younger girl, Lilly, clings to Mama, but Victoria starts breaking from her influence, wanting to embrace the “civilized” life. She tries to protect Annabel and Lucas from Mama’s jealous rage, but Mama attacks Lucas, hospitalizing him, and leaving a reluctant Annabel in charge of the girls, although she starts to bond with them. Dreyfuss, meanwhile, investigates the truth to Mama, discovering that she was a mentally-disturbed woman whose baby was taken from her. When she tried to take her child and flee, she fell off a cliff—her child was stuck on a branch, and so since her soul was not fulfilled, she became a ghost, looking for substitute children. At the conclusion, Mama tries to take the girls with her to the afterlife, and brings them to the same cliff that she perished at. Victoria makes the decision to stay behind with her new family (stating “Victoria stay”), while Lilly passes on with Mama.

*Mama* shares many similar elements with *Silent Hill*, such as having adopted daughters for child characters, repeating heteronormative, gender essentialist values, and relying on supernatural terror. They are also post-9/11 films, and their themes, plots, and conclusions behave as ambiguous responses to 9/11 culture, but their focus and implications differ. In the previous chapter, I discussed how *Silent Hill*’s ending criticizes the patriarchal backlash against feminism that worried about an “emasculated” American culture vulnerable to foreign attack.



That film evokes a desire for stabilization through gender essentialism, specifically for female nurturing, by celebrating motherhood with its Good Mother protagonist. But the film also dismisses the idea that maternal love can “fix” or stabilize society, as Rose did not stop the demon or the townsfolk herself, and she cannot return to the real world. Ironically, this movie’s conclusion implies that motherhood cannot redeem society, yet this is its most redemptive trait, because it disabuses the societal expectation typically placed on motherhood (and the ideal American family) to heal the nation.

*Mama* also provides a complex response to motherhood and the “ideal” American family in relation to post-9/11 desire for stabilization, although this potential lies buried beneath repetition of heteronormative tradition. But unlike *Silent Hill*, *Mama* repeats older horror traditions of external threat related to the Other, and seems to validate the anxiety of infiltration. This contributes to the theme of abjection, depicting the Bad Mother antagonist, Mama, as a detrimental influence that impedes the child characters’ development and adjustment into the civilized world. The older daughter, Victoria, succeeds in abjecting Mama’s influence, but Lilly does not, and dies as a result. However, there exists an alternate interpretation of their relationship, which contributes to the film’s redemptive potential for hauntings.

However, we’ll focus on the problems first, beginning with Mama’s threat as an external Other that infiltrates the domestic sphere. Most of the films that I have analyzed throughout this thesis have often framed the threat as internal, deriving from issues within the domestic sphere, or in relation to American culture and institutions. In general, maternal horror narratives – which typically consist of Bad Mother antagonists – depict internal threats because the Bad Mother represents the anxieties of negative, detrimental maternal influence. In some cases a maternal horror film addresses the concern of dominant and problematic patriarchal hegemonic traditions.

There are cases where there are external threats, but those threats are not Bad Mothers themselves—external threats may be a cult or the malevolent child spirit raised by a Bad Mother, as we’ve seen throughout the thesis, but the external threat will not be the Bad Mother.

*Mama* is an exception to the rule, because she behaves as both an external and an internal threat. She is external because she is an intruder, an invader. The film’s horror does not derive from environmental threats—all of the supernatural or terrifying elements derive strictly from Mama. Wherever she goes, the horror follows. She did not live in the house before, nor does she have any initial ties to Annabel and Lucas, until they adopt the girls. When they try to take on the role of parents and unconsciously replace her, she then starts to terrorize them, although she uses different tactics for each character. She takes Lucas out directly, surprising him on the staircase and knocking him unconscious; he gets hospitalized, and removed from a major portion of the film. With Annabel, Mama has a more subtle approach—during wide, continuous shots she sneaks around in the background, a fleeting shadow at the corner of the screen or darting out of the audience’s sight, while Annabel does chores around the house. At times she tricks Annabel: When Annabel is in a room doing laundry, we see a distorted figure lurking behind her, right next to a closet. Annabel tells Lilly and Victoria to be gentle while roughhousing, only to hear Victoria – in a scene that shows Lilly playing right next to her – calling for her in the next room.

Where *Silent Hill* reflects and criticizes the cultural reactions to 9/11, *Mama* appears to replicate the terrorist attack itself. It is possible to interpret Mama as similar to militant Islamic terrorist organizations like Al-Queda, who resented American presence and influence in the Middle-East. Mama is content to raise the girls, so content that she does not even initially attack the trackers or Lucas and Annabel when they take the girls away from the cabin. She is happy to follow them to the house and continue playing with them, without threatening Lucas or Annabel.

However, she notices how Victoria starts to attach herself to Lucas and Annabel, and thus rejecting her. She resents Lucas and Annabel's presence, finding their influence impeding her authority over Victoria, and possibly Lilly when Annabel and Lilly slowly bond. That is when her spirit becomes malevolent and violent; she attacks Lucas, kills Dr. Dreyfuss and their great aunt – who she never met before, thereby killing an “innocent” – and threatens Annabel, her main competition. Mama's wrath can only be assuaged when she passes on with the girl; it is a spectral suicide, taking the girls with her to death as a substitute for her lost, long-dead child. She is obsessed with the past, and she resents outside influence, which took her first child away from her, so she invades and threatens her enemies' space in order to regain power and control again. It's akin to militant Islamic terrorists making a statement, fighting Western influence in their lands by infiltrating and attacking well-known symbols of American identity and national security on American soil.

Mama's identity as an external threat also derives from her nature as an Other. For most of the Bad Mothers that I have explored, few really apply as an Other antagonist, again because they feature more as internal threats relating to hegemonic domestic influence. It's interesting, because the tenants of abjection define maternal law in opposition to paternal, the standard of hegemony according to heteronormative roles—therefore, mothers should behave as the Other. In some cases, they do to an extent: Mrs. Bates in *Psycho* exhibits Other qualities through her non-hegemonic female authority that impedes her son's agency, which opposes the hegemonic tradition of men maintaining power over women. Yet in her case, it is more of an extreme example of maternal affection, versus true Other qualities. Recalling Benshoff's discussion, the Other antagonist is more complex than being an external threat or having a “marginalized” trait that does not conform to hegemonic standards of middle-class, WASP, heterosexual masculinity.

The Other antagonist often connects with the audience, and expresses the marginalized experience, not just on a surface level, but through coding and multiple behavioral traits. That is why Norman fits the role of the Other antagonist, as opposed to his mother who is identified more strictly a Bad Mother antagonist.

Mama has a unique identity as both a Bad Mother and an Other antagonist. The film hides Mama's true nature for most of the film, until Annabel's dream sequence reveals a grotesque, skeletal woman with a disfigured face that looms over her. While she does not attack Annabel in her dream, she assesses her, crawling up to her face and staring intently at her, sizing up her competition for the girls' affections. Her appearance is disfigured, not only in death, but also in life; her flashback hints at a possible mentally disabled woman, who had elongated facial features similar to individuals with Down syndrome. It explains why her true child was taken from her, people perhaps thinking she wasn't fit to raise a child, and it explains why she jumped off the cliff with her child, preferring to die together instead of stay alive and separated. Sadly they were separated, her child caught on a branch instead of falling into the ocean with her, and so her spirit lingers, taking on substitute children to compensate for her loss, and then later satisfying her spirit when she takes Lilly with her to a second death.

At the same time, Mama displays traits of internal threat through her Bad Mother qualities. Although she penetrates the domestic bubble, one can argue that she is only following "her children" or household, or that Victoria and Lilly invited her into the house. She has established her family long before Lucas and Annabel have, despite Lucas being the girls' uncle. Furthermore, she still displays qualities of Bad Motherhood, stunting Victoria and Lilly's development by raising them as feral children, influencing their development so much that they become threats themselves, at least for their re-induction, when we see them as feral children.

When the men hired by Lucas discover the cabin and enter, distorted humanoid figures scurry amongst the shadows. We suspect that the shadows are actually Mama about to kill the men, but it is actually the girls. They do not directly attack the men, but they still have monstrous qualities themselves: Emancipated bodies, untamed hair, animalistic groaning, and twitchy movements. These are all traits that Mama displays when the movie finally reveals her, thus showing the detrimental affect she has had on the girls. Mama's threat in this case is similar to movies like *Psycho*, *Carrie*, and *The Brood*.

This dual-identity as Other and Bad Mother may explain why the movie engages with abjection – specifically related to childhood development – in a more overt manner than other maternal horror narratives do. Other films demonstrate the importance for the child characters to abject the negative maternal influence that hinder their development to the point of malevolent behavior, but they indicate a sense of failure, of the child characters falling to the influence at the cost of their (and others') lives, and sanity. *Mama* shows this, as well as successful abjection: Its two child characters display varying degrees of capitulation to Mama's influence, with Victoria successfully abjecting Mama and living, and Lilly succumbing and dying.

The older sister, Victoria, resists Mama's influence; she must take off the glasses when she is in Mama's presence, but she keeps them on at other times. She is able to speak, and does so with Annabel, trying to warn her without making Mama mad. She sleeps on the bed and does chores. It's easy to understand why Victoria is able to resist Mama—she understands what “civilized” life is like, as she was approximately four or five when her father took her to the woods, and when she met Mama. She retains memories of that old life, and is not only able to adjust, but recognize that she prefers a life with Lucas and Annabel, as opposed to Mama. It's also significant that Victoria is pre-pubescent, on the verge of adolescent sexual development.

This is the time that a child exhibits independent qualities from parents, and further establish their identity and interactions with the outside world. Not only does she reject Mama's influence because she remembers civilized life, but at an important stage of her life, it is necessary for her to abject, if she wants to develop in accordance to hegemonic standards of appropriated, civilized behavior—which include gender roles, as she will soon begin developing female secondary sexual characteristic. Mama is an authoritative, monstrous feminine, Other, Bad Mother, and therefore a bad influence that can impede Victoria's adherence to gender tradition of nurturing, passive femininity.

Lilly, on the other hand, maintains a strong bond with Mama, which actually helps complicate Mama's identity as a Bad Mother antagonist. As stated, the Other antagonist has the potential to challenge the hegemonic tradition because of its appeal as a marginalized experience that engenders sympathy (but also anxiety) from mainstream spectators, and empathy from non-hegemonic movements, like LGBTQIAP spectators, who appropriate the character as representation. It is possible for disabled spectators to appropriate Mama as a representative of their experience, as a member who faces discrimination including domestic affairs, where they consider her unsuited to raise a child.

At the very least, Mama engenders sympathy from the spectator because of her relationship with Lilly, and her identity as a mother who lost her child. In Lilly's case, Mama is not a Bad Mother, she is the only mother she knows; Mama's maternal love is not oppressive or stifling, as it is for Victoria, it is imply caring and compassionate. In the beginning, when the movie hides her appearance, we “see” them playing—we see Lilly in her room playing tug of war with something off-screen, and then floating through the air, laughing. Lilly throughout the film stays silent, speaking only in screams and grunts, only able to say “Victoria” and “Mama.”

She is only happy around Mama's presence, and when Annabel and Lucas try to show her any physical affection, she rejects them. Lilly responds to Annabel's affection only one time, when Annabel gently warms up her cold skin, which angers Mama enough that she actually threatens Lilly and Victoria, chasing them around the house, and then dragging them to the cliff to kill them, so that they join her. Even after Mama shows her anger against her, Lilly still loves her and wants to join her.

The conclusion further complicates the story's implications by combining classic and postmodern horror elements, where the narrative closure includes the hero and villain's victories. At the final scene, when Mama starts floating away from the cliff, Lilly runs after her, arms out, calling out for her Mama. When Mama does pick her up, Lilly gets upset that Victoria stays behind, but Mama then cocoons them in her spectral dress, and Lilly cheers up again, smiling happily at her. They fall into the ocean, and then change into moths, symbol of rebirth. Therefore, Mama does triumph, because she convinces one of the girls to go along with her, but she also "dies" (again), and on a satisfied note. And Annabel and Lucas triumphs, as Victoria stays with them. Mama is content to pass on, unlike postmodern antagonists that triumph, and her terror did not negatively impact the family. If anything, one can thank Mama for bringing Annabel, Lucas, and Victoria together as a family, because without her, Lucas's brother would have killed the girls. Extending the 9/11 metaphor or response, Mama serves a similar purpose to the event, unifying disparate people through a national trauma.

This possible interpretative redeems not only the film, but also the mother protagonist maternal horror formula, and horror fiction as a whole. Contemporary postmodern horror seems to revel in the destructive, hopeless qualities with the absence of closure and the antagonist's triumph, but *Mama* demonstrates that fiction can heal the old wounds by confronting them.

Going through tragedy or anxiety with other people allows connection to form, even in the theater space for fictional experiences. *Mama* uses a mother character to heal the wounds, thus relying on the adage of female nurturing; but it revisits the haunting by using the Bad Mother antagonist instead of a Good Mother character; Mama is a threat to unify against, and she saves the two girls, which allows Lucas and Annabel to find them later in life.

Of course, *Mama* still exhibits problematic qualities. It perpetuates gender essentialism through patriarchal maternalist rhetoric, using its Good Mother protagonist to repeat the value that women are natural nurturers and must bond with children. This applies to Mama as well, as one can ask why it had to be a mother as opposed to a father specter. However, Annabel's arc presents more problems, because she is an adult female character forced to become a nurturer despite being an unconventional individual that scorns traditional femininity and hegemonic behavior. She has to take care of Victoria and Lilly, even though she doesn't want to, by the sole virtue of her gender that assumes all women harbor "nurturing instincts."

The movie goes out of its way to define Annabel as a woman who rejects domesticity. She defies all conventions of femininity, wearing black T-shirts, sporting a pixie haircut with her hair so black that it may be a possible dye job, and playing lead guitar in a rock band. When we first meet her, she expresses joy about receiving a negative result on a pregnancy test. Then when she meets the girls, she greets them in a stiff, awkward manner, trying to smile and speak to them in a warm, welcoming tone, but when they don't respond, she drops her smile and gives Lucas a disgruntled look. After Mama attacks Lucas, Annabel confides in her friends about her frustrations, but when they tell her to leave the "family," she replies, "I can't do that to him." She stays for Lucas's sake; if she leaves them with Dr. Dreyfuss, they would go to their great aunt, as a hospitalized (and single adopted father) Lucas could not provide the adequate care for them.



Yet despite her reluctance, she makes an effort to take care of them. Even after Lucas upsets Annabel by prioritizing the girls over her, she stays, and forms an attachment with the girls.

It is possible to interpret the film as challenging heteronormative gender roles. It is possible that film is criticizing the idea that all women are instinctive nurturers or harbor maternal affection for children. Annabel takes a long time to make a significant connection with the girls; the movie very little shows any interaction between her and Victoria, much less between her and Lilly. We see only one scene more than halfway through the film of her displaying any physical affection or maternal care, when she brings Lilly – who slept outside for one night – and warms her up, and even after that, she does not necessarily talk to the girls as an “ideal” mother to daughters, but as a big sister or as a younger aunt. Annabel also maintains her identity as a rebel, still wearing her T-shirts and torn jeans throughout the whole film, never changing her wardrobe or punk-rock make-up. Therefore, it is possible to interpret the film as showing a woman simply developing a rapport with child.

However, what impedes this interpretation is Lucas, who is both important and insignificant to the plot. His presence (or lack thereof) highlights the possible alternate domestic gender role options that can avoid the notion of nurturing femininity. Lucas ties the girls to Annabel, respectively as uncle and boyfriend. He not only has a reason to find the girls, but he also expresses his constant concern for their wellbeing, and his desire to be their guardian. He faces their great-aunt in court for a custody battle; he complies with Dr. Dreyfuss’s orders to live in a state-sanctioned house where the psychiatrist can monitor the girls’ behavior; he begs his girlfriend to stay so that they may pass off as a couple, and appear as “appropriate” guardians. He even tells Annabel directly that they are the most important thing to him, which upsets her, and even makes her jealous.

It would be possible for the film to criticize institutional prejudice against single fathers, where courts often grant custody to women and not men. However, other elements detract from this point, because Lucas is absent for most of the film. He only speaks to the girls at the child welfare center, giving Victoria her glasses. We see Annabel doing the chores around the house, but we don't see him walking around the house, even though his introduction scene establishes him as a freelance artist that most likely works from home. He has two scenes that take place in the house: One is during a short, awkward dinner – which demonstrates Lilly's uncivilized eating habits – while the second shows Mama attacking and hospitalizing him. This removes him from the film and house for a majority of the film. He experiences a dream sequence involving his twin brother pointing him to the cabin, but it is more of an excuse to remind the audience that he exists. He reaches the cliff at the ending, but he cannot stop Mama, and so he is rather pointless.

He is especially pointless on a thematic level, if one considers the parental figures as representing choices. The film only needs Annabel to stand in as Victoria's choice for civilization and abjection, which makes sense if we focus on the idea of contrasting mothers. Lucas is even more pointless than Christopher from *Silent Hill*, because we have Dr. Dreyfuss to provide a male, authoritative presence and exposition into Mama's background. Lucas contributes to the problem of the film's gender essentialist implications, because it shows the potential of a nurturing father figure, who actively expresses the desire to take care of children, but he does nothing in the film, and barely interacts with the girls. He exists more so to complete the domestic standard of a heterosexual two-parent household, which enforces the traditions that women are nurturers, but single mothers cannot take care of children by themselves.

There are two possible solutions to these problems. The film could have removed Annabel, and had Good Father protagonist to contrast a Bad Mother antagonist, like *The Brood*.

This decision runs the risk of complying with abjection's tenants, where Victoria rejects the destructive maternal, feminine influence in order to accept paternal, masculine law. This might have allowed patriarchal antimaternalist rhetoric to reduce Mama as a typically abusive Bad Mother antagonist, because the film would have lacked benevolent mother characters to balance out the negative maternal influence. However, if we maintain every element as the same, where Lucas stands in place of Annabel, and we expect the film to still portray Mama as a sympathetic mother ghost, then this decision could have challenged the heteronormative roles by portraying a man as a natural nurturer, who rivals Mama's maternal love regardless of his gender. It would be a new portrayal, showing two types of parents who actually are loving parents in their own right, and so keep one child a piece.

Another solution is to remove Lucas, and instead make Annabel their aunt. She might have to express a desire to take care of them initially. However, she could also be forced to take care of them by virtue of being their closest living relative, and retain her identity as an individual, as a nonconformist with interests unrelated to domestic affairs. There would be very little to change from the initial story, and it would help highlight the film's challenge to the abjection formula, as the representative of paternal, civilized law would be a woman that rejects the hegemony. Annabel does condescend to the gender traditions by becoming the girls' caretaker, but she does not fully signify heteronormative traditions, so she and Mama would stand more as equals, as different types of motherhood that suits two types of nurturing or lifestyles, which would then demonstrate a new household – single mothers – as a different form of stabilization.

However, the film subtly redeems the haunting of the American family. It concludes the film with Mama and Lilly dead together, turned into butterflies as symbols of rebirth, and Annabel, Lucas, and Victoria embracing as a new, unified family finding stability in each other.

It is difficult to say whether Annabel chose to stay with the two, but one assumes that she did, in order to project narrative closure with a “happy family” resolution. However, this family still defies American domestic tradition, because they challenge the “ideal” or traditional American family. The nuclear family evokes the image of a middle-class household with a working, wise father, a nurturing, passive mother, and well-behaved children. Lucas, Annabel and Victoria do not fit this mold. Lucas appears more nurturing than Annabel does, yet he does not protect the family from the threat of Mama, nor does he dispense any worldly wisdom or advice to his children. Annabel has her own profession and constantly dismisses the idea of family, while maintaining a nonconformist appearance for the whole film. Victoria is well-behaved, but she could suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder later in life, if she cannot recover from her sister’s death or her experience living in the woods, being raised by a possessive ghost.

This movie repeats the domestic tradition of a heterosexual two-parent household, but it challenges this haunting by distinguishing each member as a non-traditional family member. This broadens family representation and shows the potential for portraying other households in media. *Mama* can generate new traditions of the domestic sphere, and challenge the hegemony by encouraging other (horror) films to depict marginalized experiences, such as single parents, non-heterosexual couples, non-white families. Horror can then consider new anxieties and resolutions, and thus project new stabilizing traditions in American culture.

## **Conclusion**

I want to recall the film’s quote: “A ghost is an emotion bent out of shape, condemned to repeat itself time and time again, until it rights the wrong that was done.” The problem is not repetition; as we discussed in the Introduction, engagement with past ideologies is necessary in recognizing problems with the social structure, and confront these temporal, spectral anxieties.

The problem is stagnant repetition, when the same handful of arguments perpetuate. Being aware of past and future specters and their effects on the present time can challenge these arguments, and confront the actual issue at heart. I do not want to argue with maternalist or antimaternalist rhetoric, but we need to recognize that the maternalism-antimaternalism arguments often ignore the mother's experience, or impose blame and expectations upon all mothers, as opposed to criticizing the structure. I do not want to say that maternal love is not possible, but argue that it is not a required component of all feminine experience, which neglects numerous feminine voices who cannot or do not want to conceive. It is important to discuss repetitions, especially in media because it influences the general populace, as spectators internalize the themes projected by the narratives; if we want to evoke change, we need to recognize the traditions that we repeat in mainstream culture.

On the surface level, *Mama* seems to repeat the same hegemonic traditions without any level of engagement or alteration. This especially applies to its plot's execution in regards to parent roles, foisting the responsibility of motherhood onto Annabel, even though it also provides a father character who would prove more suitable to take care of the girls. However, closer inspection of other details, such as its portrayal of Mama and Annabel, and its resolution through an unconventional family unit, shows the potential for new repetition.

The problematic elements are more noticeable over its promising features, but it does not make the film a stagnant haunting. It may not right the wrong, but it poses this possibility. The movie frames the Bad Mother antagonist as a sympathetic character and identifiable character for maternal experience, something that has not happened with previous Bad Mother antagonists. It maintains Annabel's individual nature, so that we relate to Annabel as a character in her own right, who maintains her subjectivity, as opposed to being an unchanging Good or Bad Mother.

While it imposes the mother role onto her and tries to “fix” her maternal impotence, it also implies that maternal instinct is not a natural instinct for all women. Finally, it unifies the characters into a heterosexual two-parent household, but each member does not conform to the hegemonic or “idealized” American behavior, which suggests that American culture can and should find stability through new domestic units. All in all, this film can be a possible stepping stone for new directions in the maternal horror narrative.

### **Conclusion: The Future of Maternal Horror**

Ghosts and repetitions are not inherently negative or problematic; in fact, they can generate awareness of problems by calling attention to the concerns of the past and future, and accent the circumstantial context that contributed to traditions haunting our society. The narrative's execution determines whether these repetitions can consider new trajectories and resolutions, or if the repetitions remain stagnant and reiterate the same arguments and problems. Horror cinema is a good vehicle for these discussions because of its nature of confronting specters of the past, present, and future as various types of monsters. Horror cinema engages the cultural anxieties, and generates some sort of resolution; even if the film lacks narrative closure, there are usually intended implications to these open conclusions that respond to the contemporary socio-political atmosphere.

However, horror also suffers the possibility of stagnation, too, of being interpreted only as a narrative tool for destruction and hopelessness. A perfect example of this mindset comes from Kevin J. Wetmore's (2012) statement: "I am fan of horror that does not merely play at horror, horror that does not compromise at the end, horror that embraces the nihilism of its time and shows us what we fear most" (Wetmore 203). While that is his opinion, I must dispute his claim that a "good" horror film embraces nihilism. I would argue that this mindset causes stagnation in horror film, and causes the repetition of the problematic traditions. It automatically assumes that horror films only offer two options with generalized conclusions and implications:

A hegemonic solution that reinforces the status quo, or destroy the structure and accept that there is no hope. This may not be his intention, but that is how his wording comes across.

Instead, there is a third option that *compromises* these resolutions: Destroy the structure in order to allow a new resolution. This does not need to be so dramatic either; it can simply change the trajectory of the tradition for a new type of stabilization. Wetmore states that “...post-9/11 horror did not invent the bleak ending, nihilism, the deaths of all the protagonists or the triumph of evil. However, just as a paradigm shift occurred in the United States politically, culturally, and socially on 9/11, so too a paradigm shift has also occurred in American cinema”(Wetmore, 13). I ask, is that necessarily a bad thing? Of course, a paradigm shift causes destabilization and disrupts the foundation, sometimes even decimating it, but it is how change occurs. The victory of the monster indicates that the old, problematic traditions could not resolve the issue, so let us consider new options, or reconsider the haunting in a new direction, for our context, that can address the problems that we have long ignored.

Furthermore, *Mama* proves that the monster’s victory and a rejection of the status quo does not spell out destruction; the movie instead offers a hopeful future and stabilization through an unconventional domestic unit. *Mama*’s theme addresses the nature of specters, and posits that things can change, the wrongs – of tragedy and patriarchal society – can be righted. It bears repetitions, but if we change those repetitions, we can challenge the conclusions and our traditions. If we change the portrayal of motherhood in our media, if we revise the mother protagonist maternal horror narrative, we can affect change in our system regarding gender and sexual politics. We can criticize the institutional structures that impose pressures of masculinity and femininity, instead of blaming feminists or women for emasculating the culture, or blaming mothers for complying with the patriarchal structure without recognizing the reasons they do so.



Instead of going in a cycle about maternalist and antimaternalist sentiments, guided by either patriarchal or feminist rhetoric, we can break the cycle, and stop imposing expectations and standards upon motherhood.

### **2010s – *The Conjuring* and *Carrie***

Have we started to right the wrongs in maternal horror narratives? It is difficult to gauge, as we have only two other maternal horror narratives released after *Mama*: James Wan's *The Conjuring* (2013) and Kimberly Pierce's *Carrie* (2013) remake, both of which derive from original sources, and so are repeating ghosts for a present context. Whether based in real life or on a fictional narrative, both rely on some established story, and so may continue to project tradition and repeat certain conclusions, depending on their execution. While they may affect the future trajectories, it's also important to remember that a post-9/11 context can influence the films' intentions as well.

*The Conjuring* relies on the accounts of a real-life couple, Ed and Lorraine Warren, and their supposed experience with exorcising a malevolent ghost from a mother. While it is difficult to ask whether the film could have altered the narrative elements, we can question why the filmmakers used this account versus other possible cases that the couple oversaw. The focus on motherhood and the successful exorcism appeal to desires for stability through secured notions of domestic roles. The film depicts Good Mothers Lorraine exorcising the malevolent spirit of Bad Mother Bathsheba, who killed her child for Satan, out of the body of Carolyn Perron. This film not only reflects the mother protagonist maternal horror formula, but it depicts a battle of motherhood, of a Good Mother fighting a Bad Mother for the soul of another mother. Carolyn is portrayed as a Good Mother, never raising her voice at her six daughters even though they can be a handful, and participating in their games even though she may be busy with household chores.

However, she falls victim to the influence of a Bad Mother, and requires the guidance of a Good Mother, Lorraine, to exorcise the Bad Mother influence.

Lorraine is a Good Mother, portrayed as a soft-spoken, compassionate woman who worries constantly about her young daughter, and how her absence from home may affect her daughter. She constantly voices her regret about not being at home, not being with her daughter; she always looks at her daughter's picture in her locket, and always treats her daughter, as well as Carolyn's daughters, in an indulgent, compassionate fashion, never raising her voice at them or getting angry. In a sense, the movie is depicting maternal impotence; Lorraine's career takes her away from home, so she is often away from her daughter. It is difficult to state whether the movie blames Lorraine from being apart from her daughter, as it depicts a scene where a demonic doll attacks her daughter while Lorraine and Warren attend to their job. Yet Lorraine does not seem to undergo any arc or development; she remains the same from beginning to the end, and in fact exorcises the Bad Mother spirit through maternal love, by reminding Carolyn of her love for her daughters.

The film frames Bathsheba, the malevolent ghost possessing Carolyn, as a Bad Mother, engaging in the most extreme, selfish "maternal" act that considers about her needs at the cost of her child's. She possesses mothers and causes them to kill their own children, which continues the cycle of malevolent motherhood against their own will, which she attempts to do with Carolyn. There is a problem to this portrayal, in that it codes women who do not express nurturing traits as malevolent and murderous, whereas women who do (Lorraine and Carolyn) are coded as benevolent and holy, as Lorraine, not her husband, exorcises the spirit. However, Bathsheba operates as a monstrous feminine threat that fails, but after a long line of successes; she is bested by other women, not by a man, and not by brute strength, but through love.

Therefore, this challenges the notion that masculine action heroes always protect the helpless female victims in horror films, and instead depicts women protagonists taking action against her, even though they do so by a gender essentialist notion of maternal love, which is tied to their femininity. This film also demonstrates that post-9/11 horror can conclude with hopeful resolutions of redemption and unification after a tragic, horrifying event—again, occurring because of the efforts of women and love, as opposed to the traditional closure of the masculine hero's confrontational triumph over the monster. Yes, the film repeats that the domestic structure resolves the conflict and recovers stability, but the execution does not repeat the classic methods of victory. Again, showing the subtle changes that can apply to these specters.

Subtle changes can also affect a remake, such as in the case of *Carrie*. For the most part, the 2013 remake replicates the film scene-by-scene, although it expands a few characters' roles, and modernizes the setting to contemporary times. The movie does subtly alter the depiction of Margaret White, painting her in a different light that allows for the portrayal of maternal experience. The movie begins with Margaret giving birth to Carrie: We see her alone in her room, crying out for help and wondering what is happening to her, suggesting that she didn't realize that she was pregnant. When she gives birth and looks at her infant, she prepares her kill the child—but stops, and then embraces her. This new scene allows audiences to sympathize with Margaret, seeing her in a vulnerable position at a young age herself, which explains why she represses Carrie so much, because she doesn't want the same thing to happen to her.

In the original, Margaret behaves as more of a strawman of a fundamentalist Christian, going to her neighbor's house, smiling, and talking to them about Jesus. In this film, Margaret does not voluntarily interact with anybody, and only talks to customers as a requirement. Even this distresses her, as we see her gripping a pair of scissors, like she wants to stab something.

There is no doubt that 2013 Margaret is still a repressed, fundamentalist Christian, but these two scenes help expand her character further, even letting the audience connect and sympathize with her as an lonely individual who gave birth to Carrie, and took care of her all by herself.

*Carrie* 2013 still repeats the narrative, but this subtle change to one element engenders some discussion about Margaret's character, and the responsibilities of motherhood. Margaret is still a Bad Mother who represses her daughter, but the movie offers a glimpse into her past that explains her maternal impotence. It's a peek into the maternal experience, which redeems a narrative that villainized its Bad Mother completely, and suggests a possibility in future maternal horror narratives to portray the mother character, whether Good or Bad, as an individual as opposed to a straw-man representation of the social problems.

### **Final Thoughts**

My thesis has shown that problematic films still harbor potential elements that challenge the repetitions for new resolutions. The mother protagonist maternal horror formula suffers from the problems of repeating gender essentialist traditions that force women into nurturing roles, and classify mothers as Good or Bad depending on how the mother character expresses maternal love. However, while these derive from a desire for stabilization, these films also dispute the patriarchal, hegemonic resolutions to varying degrees, and posit new iterations to the traditions or provide new conclusions. There is hope of further challenging the repeated traditions for new solutions, but we must, how can we further challenge the repetitions, especially in regards to gender essentialist sentiments that constantly project nurturing Good Mothers versus selfish and impotent Bad Mothers.

There are plenty of solutions. We can broaden the anxieties of destabilization, and recover from contemporary and lingering trauma from the 2000s through domestic horror plots.

As suggested with *Mama*, family-based horror can re-imagine the new family structure, and reflect our current generation, depicting single parent, interracial, and LGBTQIAP households. In the past, American culture has interpreted divorce and other non-heteronormative elements as signs of disarray and destruction of American unifying values—but horror cinema has the potential to argue that it isn't a sign of “destruction” but remodeling. The nuclear family has not gone away, but we do not need to hold all families to an exclusive set of standards. Horror films do not need to perpetuate the same cultural anxieties of “how to restore or reject the ideal.”

On that note, we can develop a new narrative formula, paternal horror, similar to *The Brood* or the video game *SH1*, but choose different antagonists as opposed to Bad Mothers. Granted, there are Good Father protagonists, but they are not held to the same standard, nor do they face parallel comparisons to Bad Fathers in film. Yet each film that we have examined have included fathers, despite the fact that the fathers rarely interact with the children, or offer any support to the Good Mother protagonists. This all preserves the tradition of the heterosexual two-parent household as a form of stability. However, if we portray a single mother, a Good Father character (married or not), or non-heterosexual parents as the protagonist to resolve the conflict, we can still repeat the tradition of domestic stability, but also break down the gender essentialist arguments of nurturing (straight) mothers. These representations can alleviate the imposed social pressures of masculinity and femininity, and represent marginalized experiences, which can contribute to social activism by “normalizing” rather than Other-ing families that do not conform to the idealized tradition.

However, I also believe that we keep the maternal horror narrative because of their potential. The movies that I analyzed all demonstrate promising challenges to the traditions through various elements, despite the problematic, gender essentialist traditions that they repeat.

The mother protagonist maternal horror provides an opportunity for female-driven narratives with compelling monstrous-feminine Bad Mother protagonists and active Good Mother protagonists. Both characters supply a chance for women spectators to relate to active female protagonists, or for men spectators to recognize feminine subject hood. But we must stay aware of how we execute the narratives, especially if the implicated messages or depictions enforce heteronormative roles. Instead of emphasizing Good and Bad mothering, the narrative should depict an individual mother's subjective experience. These narratives should stop projecting the responsibility of nurturing upon a female character, just because she is a woman. These narratives can also show that maternal impotence can apply to all mothers, not just Bad Mothers, and will not completely detriment a child's development. And these narrative should recognize that various institutional structures have placed expectations on mothers to maintain internal stabilization, and assumes gender traditions that only women can mother.

This does not mean that we should ignore the consequences of inadequate parenting that may affect internal anxieties or conflict, but we need to ask why we hold mothers (women) to these standards. We need to consider how to preserve the mother's subject-hood, and avoid the audience projecting maternalist and/or antimaternalist biases upon her and the antagonist. We can consider mother antagonists as monstrous-feminine antagonists with motivations other than malevolent deeds, instead of viewing mothers that do not demonstrate perfect maternal love – completely sacrificial, intuitive of the child's every need, and independently capable of fulfilling all of those needs – as Bad Mothers. Rather than approaching the maternal horror narrative assuming that women mother, filmmakers need to question their their themes and intentions.

Horror and motherhood, as separate entities, can destabilize us by forcing us to confront anxieties and threats, and recognize that the expected solution may not apply or fix the problem.

Yet these do not have to suggest that there is no hope, but rather ask what we are doing wrong at the moment, and what to change in order to consider a new perspective or solution. Rather than repeating the past for a predictable future, we can think of new trajectories, think of how new anxieties and new maternal experiences can disrupt our security, and make the audience think of new possibilities. The films that I close-analyzed show this potential, demonstrating that they can offer new resolutions and trajectories even though they repeat problematic, gender-essentialist traditions. If we continue changing elements within the maternal horror narrative, we can repeat certain traditions in a new light to stabilize American society in a different fashion.

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